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Best year ever?

Even at the start of 2015, I felt it was going to be a better year for games than the one before. *GTA V*, *The Witcher 3* and probably a Bethesda RPG – those alone would have made it outstanding, but in 2015 even the slightly disappointing games, like *Mad Max*, were better than usual. There's so much to play that I'll never catch up. A good problem.

2016 kicks off in style with *XCOM 2*, this month's cover game. My mild fear is that the year just won't end up being quite as exciting as 2015 – but with a new *Mass Effect*, *Dishonored* and *Total War*, how can it not?



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The PC Gamer team



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Apocalypses, meat
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This month
Ventured into the Commonwealth to deliver the only correct review of *Fallout 4*.



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This month
Pulled his perturbed glasses expression at the various explosions offered by *Just Cause 3*.



JOHN STRIKE
Specialist in
Design, sausage dogs
This month
Got married, which is big news, and dressed his sausage dogs in doggy tuxedos, which is huge news. But his real wife remains *Battlefield 4*.

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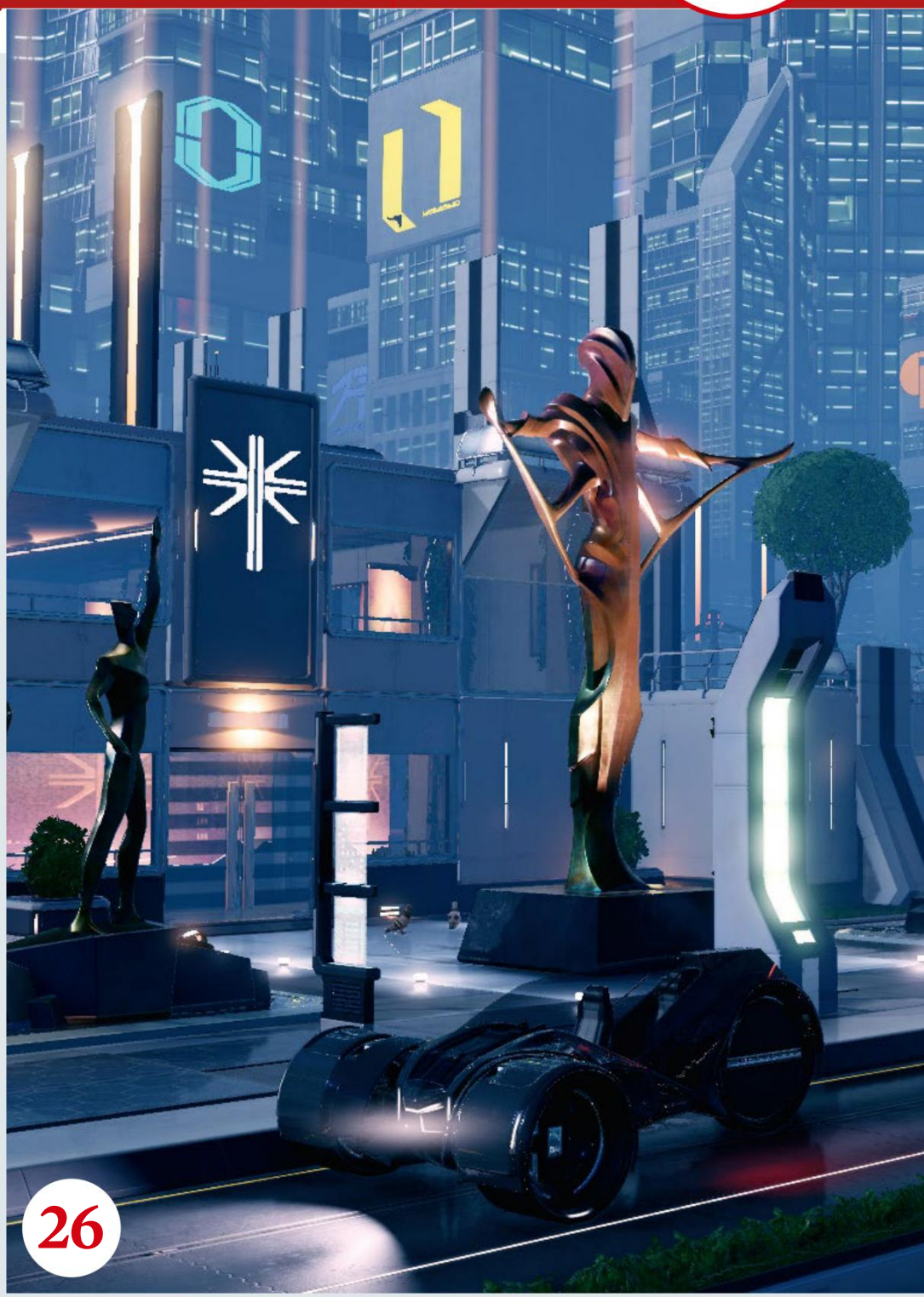
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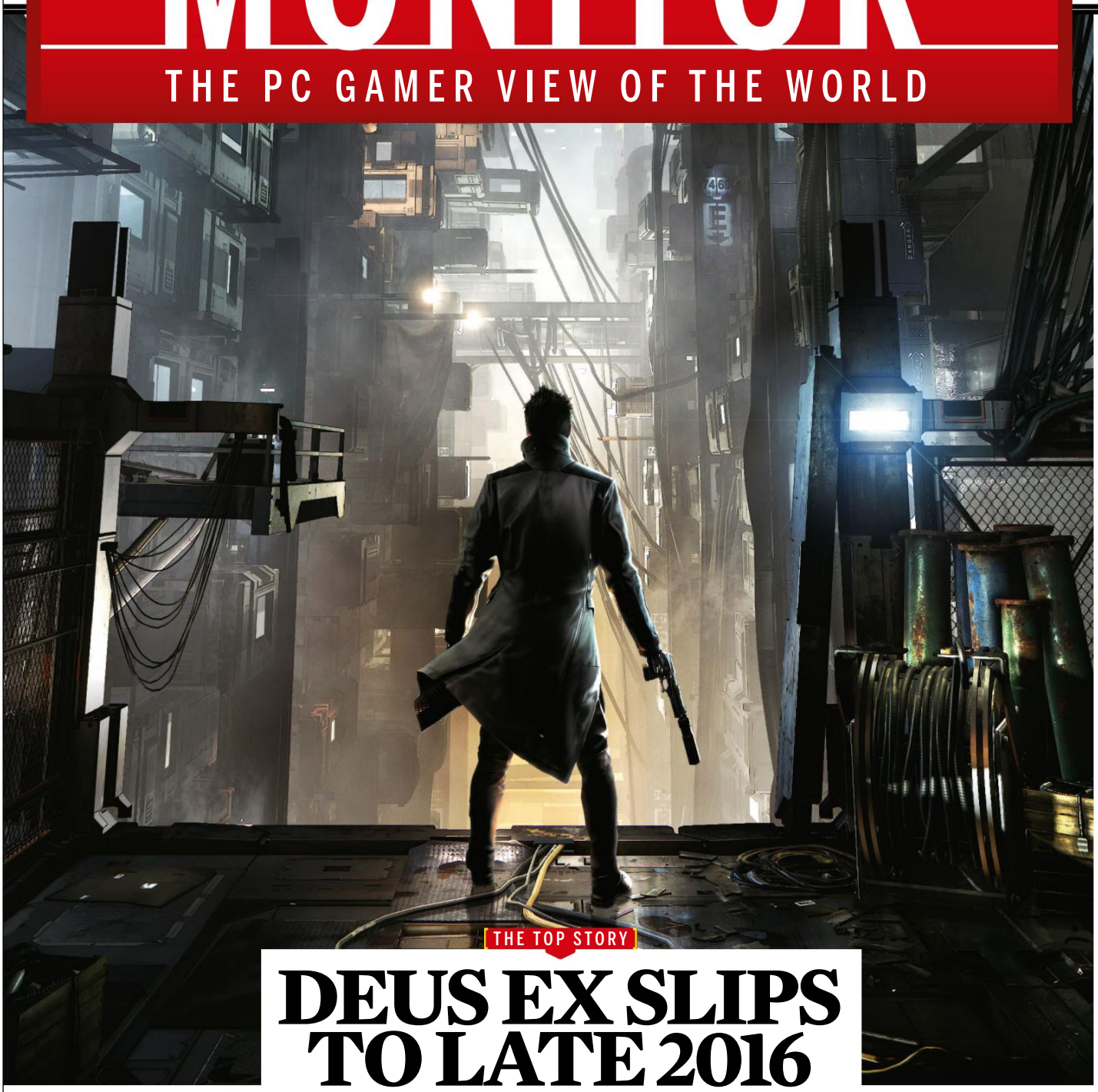
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THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD



THE TOP STORY

DEUS EX SLIPS TO LATE 2016

Eidos Montreal's sequel is now due five years after HUMAN REVOLUTION

Deus Ex: Mankind Divided **has had its release date pushed back from February 2016 to August 2016, which means that by the time it finally appears almost exactly five years will have passed since the release of *Human Revolution*. While expressing confidence and pride in his project, Eidos Montreal's David Anfossi said "as we are now playing through the game in full we can see that it will require more time in post-production for tuning, iterations and refinement to meet our high standards."**

He goes on to apologise for the delay and for disappointing players. On the one hand, August feels like forever away, but on the other, I was enormously encouraged by what I read in Tom Senior's cover feature two issues ago about how they're building

"WE CAN SEE THAT IT WILL REQUIRE MORE TIME IN POST-PRODUCTION FOR TUNING"

on the previous game. The sequel to *Human Revolution*, I think, has the potential to be one of the great PC games of this age – and there's no shortage of things to play in the meantime. It joins *Hitman* and *Mirror's Edge Catalyst* in slipping gently down the release schedule.

I'm actually pretty glad a bunch of games got delayed in 2015. Imagine trying to fit in *XCOM 2* or *Hitman* around *Metal Gear Solid V, The Witcher 3, Fallout* and *Star Wars Battlefront* – there would have been everything to play in December and not a huge amount from January to August. ■

Samuel Roberts

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WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

THE SPY



The Spy knows what you'll do next summer.

Space holds no interest for The Spy. The Earth is full of fascinating, mysterious and unbelievable things – wireless electricity, Republican presidential candidates and jean shorts, to name just three. Space, conversely, is pretty barren. It's just immense balls of hot plasma, floating rocks and laser-armed supervillain death fortresses, all scattered around an impossibly vast and empty nothingness. The Spy resents being dragged up there to foil yet another cackling evil genius, and would appreciate it if everyone went back to building their lairs in the heart of an active volcano. At least there you can work on your base tan.

The Spy blames sci-fi for this continued interest in the stars – sometimes despite the genre's own efforts to put people off. If three Star Wars films about taxation, Gungans and midi-chlorians can't persuade fans that space is a deeply boring place, nothing will. And so it shouldn't come as a surprise to learn that the internet is losing its collective mind over BioWare's much anticipated *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. Details remain sketchy, but it is known that the game will feature a new protagonist, and a new region of space – hence the title.

A new *Mass Effect: Andromeda* trailer was released for N7 day – or November 7th, as people who aren't part of *Mass Effect* fandom call it. The video features a montage of real-life space missions, as well as CGI representations of planets and solar systems. It's narrated by Jennifer Hale, voice actor for the awkwardly named 'FemShep'. An effective bit of fan service, then, but one that could also hide the announcement of *Andromeda's* protagonist. Around 48 seconds into the trailer, the cockpit of a spaceship can be seen as it reverses away from Earth. In that cockpit is a dogtag, which, if you activate CSI's zoom-and-enhance software, shows a name: 'Ryder'.

Fans speculate that Ryder is a reference to Sally Ride, the first American woman in space. If so, it would fit. *Mass Effect*'s Commander Shepard was named after Alan Shepard, the first American man in space. Between the name's probable inspiration and Hale's voiceover, it could be a sign that BioWare's marketing will focus on a female lead character – just as ManShep was assumed to be the default lead for the original trilogy. Alternatively, it means that *Mass Effect* fans read too much into everything, and that, next E3, the main character will be revealed as smack-talking, quick-quipping space badass Captain Jake Murderstab.

ALTERNATIVELY, IT MEANS THAT *MASS EFFECT* FANS READ TOO MUCH INTO EVERYTHING

BioWare has a good relationship with its fans, but other studios are more adversarial. Consider *Grand Theft Auto V*'s publisher, Take-Two, who allegedly hired private investigators to track down the modders responsible for *FiveM* and *GTA:MP* – both designed as mod-friendly alternatives to Rockstar's own *GTA Online*. The claims were made by *FiveM* creator 'ntauthy'.

"I just got a pair of PIs at my door claiming to be sent by Take-Two," the modder wrote on Reddit, "handing me a phone with a person somewhere in the UK or US or whatever to 'discuss how to cease my activities with regard to *Grand Theft Auto*.'"

The *GTA:MP* team were more philosophical about their encounter. "Without [Take-Two] and Rockstar, we would not have this beautiful game and the opportunities to open the game for players," they wrote in a post on their site. Hopefully that was written of their own free will, and not with a pair of heavies standing by a computer, going, "Nice CPU. It would be a shame if something happened to it." Unsurprisingly, both mods have been removed by their creators.

THE MANAGEMENT

Hopefully this doesn't escalate. If other publishers get in on the action, there'll be a international PI shortage. How will jilted spouses settle divorce cases if investigators are too busy chasing down the makers of *Skyrim*'s Thomas the Tank Engine mod?

From one Take-Two franchise to another, although *BioShock*'s PIs remain purely fictional. Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick recently spoke at the MKM Partners Investor Day Conference about the future of the series. "The franchise is in the hands of 2K," he said. "They'll make announcements in due time about any upcoming releases. But *BioShock* is unquestionably a permanent franchise in our company and one that we do believe in."

Zelnick also teased Ken Levine's new game. Levine, who was last seen closing Irrational after the completion of *BioShock Infinite*'s DLC, is now working on a new sci-fi project. "I'm not going to steal Ken's thunder," Zelnick said, "but we're thrilled to be in business with Ken. What I can say is you would expect that Ken would work on something highly creative and innovative. I think that would be a reasonable expectation for whatever he does next." Tantalising stuff. The Spy would hire some private investigators to find out more, but they're all busy hunting the mastermind behind *Left 4 Dead 2*'s Teletubbies mod. Spy out. ■

The Spy



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SPECIAL REPORT



Floating islands? Roger Dean may sue.

PCG INVESTIGATES

UP TO CODE

How a university research project turned sandbox-physics-game will teach you the magic of coding

In their formative years, Stephen Foster, Adrian Lopez-Mobilia, and Jason Rosenstock were archetypal fantasy enthusiasts, with a penchant for wizardry. Yet the portrayal of spellcasting in videogames fell short of their expectations. It was, and still is, too restrictive in their eyes. Too many practical considerations block player creativity. *CodeSpells*, the trio's debut project, aims to change this by letting you code your own infinite number of spells within the game's open-world sandbox.

"When it comes to spells, most RPGs nowadays either give you something that shields you in a radius, or a projectile," says Lopez-Mobilia. "It doesn't really feel like you're gaining anything particularly creative with it. Our main goal is to create a world that incorporates systems that you want to play with, that are not static, and contain all of this stuff that feels like it exists without you."

In 2012, Foster co-founded ThoughtSTEM – a tutoring service that aimed to teach kids about computer science. *CodeSpells*, the team's debut venture, formed part of Foster's doctorate research which was eventually showcased to local elementary schools, demonstrating the virtues and basic principles of coding to eager and impressionable audiences. While it worked well in this capacity, Foster had grander plans.

Fast forward three years and *CodeSpells* has evolved into a much larger beast. It's been re-written from scratch by Lopez-Mobilia and Rosenstock – both former university peers of Foster – and aims to capture a far wider audience. By teaching players how to code their own spells, by giving them the means to manipulate their world around them, Foster and co aim to revolutionise videogame spellcasting entirely.

THE ART OF MAGIC

"Wizards tend to just have this list of spells," says Rosenstock. "My reaction to this has always been: man, I want to make up my own fireball spell, I don't want to use the generic fireball anymore, you know? ...we want the wizard to feel like more of an artist, not just someone who memorises spells. There's this idea of seeing a wizard as a scientist – as someone who learns about the world in order to influence it, instead of someone who can make something – like a fireball, for example – out of his hands."

Using a piece of software called Blockly, *CodeSpells* invites you to create code by dropping and dragging little tiles. The software can generate JavaScript, Python, PHP or Dart code and includes step-by-step execution for tracing and debugging. Using it, players can craft an effectively infinite number of possible spells.

In its current state, *CodeSpells* offers players Creative Mode – an expansive space wherein you can juggle the

TO CODE OR NOT TO CODE

"From the beginning we've been trying to make *CodeSpells* open to anyone even if they don't want to learn how to code. It was never designed to be an educational game, it was just designed to be fun. We wanted to end up with the same sort of thing as *Minecraft* – the most successful educational game in history – in that *CodeSpells* never tries to force you to learn coding. It's just a place where you can learn it if you want to."
Stephen Foster, ThoughtSTEM


Compulsory wizard pose #1...




...and #2.

CodeSpell's four elements

NOT EARTH, FIRE, WATER AND AIR, AS IT TURNS OUT



1 THOUGHTSTEM
CodeSpells **was originally used to teach elementary school children programing as part of ThoughtSTEM, a tutoring service.**



2 BLOCKLY
This visual coding language introduces players to drag-and-drop tiles and colour-coded pulldown menus to make programing as straightforward as possible.



3 CREATIVE MODE
Creative Mode currently allows players to freely roam the sandbox, zapping things. Multiplayer is scheduled for March 2016, which is when the fireworks will really start.



4 LIFE ITSELF
'Life' is *CodeSpells*' end goal mode – a fully-thriving world with friends, foes, and wildlife to interact with and build a community alongside.

elements of earth, air, fire and water in pursuit of compiling the perfect personal spellbook. Earth spells, for example, enable you to adjust the world as you see fit, growing mountains and valleys at will, sculpting the landscape to suit your imagination.

Water spells enable you to submerge entire plains or shift otherwise unmovable objects such as rocks or fallen trees. To break from the 'generic fireball', as Rosenstock suggests, you may wish to use fire spells to rain an inferno over an area you wish cleared, or, even better, run a river of molten lava through it. Trial and error via the coding interface is the best way to discover just how much you can do.

Next May will bring cooperative and competitive game modes, as well as wildlife, to the sandbox. By then, text-based input via JavaScript will also be offered to prospective programmers, adding an extra educational layer.

FOSTER AND CO AIM TO REVOLUTIONISE VIDEOGAME SPELLCASTING ENTIRELY

GAMING THE SYSTEM

What sets *CodeSpells* apart from other games that allow players to implement their own code is choice and scale. It's not a directed experience, thus trial and error plays a key part in understanding how it all works. With multiplayer implementation around the corner, one development which has surprised and pleased the team in equal measure is the growing number of players who have begun to shoehorn sports into the open world.

"We want to spark the players' imagination by placing things that mess with the preconceived systems a little bit," says Foster. "Enough to get you thinking within the world. I spend hours just trying to make the perfect thing to pick up and throw exactly where I want it, because I'm trying to play golf in the game."

He adds, "we don't necessarily want to make *CodeSpells* a game where people are constantly throwing fireballs at each other, we want people to actually have fun. I think sports will be a part of that. ...that's part of the beauty of the idea, that it's impossible to think of all the possibilities."

The latter is something that has adversely affected *CodeSpells*' development behind the scenes, yet it's still a welcomed phenomenon. In a world of indefinite properties, it seems fitting that the entire process – for both players and the development team – is foreign ground.

"There's been a few times where we've had to rethink things within the world," says Foster. "The hope has always been that this would happen but it's surprising that it's happening so early."

"Anything that feels like it breaks the systems of the world doesn't feel like a bug, but like a natural occurrence," adds Lopez-Mobilia. "The ideal scenario is that it gets to the point where anything you can do to break the game becomes a part of the game." ■

Joe Donnelly







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Spring 2016	Blizzard	In-house	www.battle.net

OVERWATCH

Blizzard's shooter sets its sights on multiplayer's toughest problems

I've been on a journey with Blizzard's latest. I've played *Overwatch* at two different events and for weeks as part of the closed beta. I've been in love with it, been cross at it, had days when I've played nothing else and others when I've declared myself done with the entire thing.

PLAYED IT

I put this down to the game's hybrid nature. Most of *Overwatch*'s DNA comes from other objective-based team shooters, particularly *Team Fortress 2* and *Enemy Territory* (plus its descendants, *Brink* and *Dirty Bomb*). This is where you get the linear attack-defence maps, the four archetypal character roles, the pushable payloads and the capture points.

Conversely, *Overwatch*'s character and ability design draws heavily from the MOBA – and I'm not just talking about slow-recharging ultimate abilities. The prominence of cooldown-restricted movement powers, stuns and knockbacks all come from this part of *Overwatch*'s heritage. As does the notion each character you play isn't just a *class* but a *hero* – somebody with a name, a distinct look, a personality and a backstory.

Much of what I love about *Overwatch* comes from this successful synthesis. Take Tracer, for example. Her burst-fire submachine guns are pure FPS, as is her sticky-bomb ultimate, but her short-range teleport and time-rewind power have their roots in the MOBA. In combination, this creates an aggressive skirmisher who fights unlike any other shooter class I've played. She excels behind enemy lines, attacking from one direction, rewinding back four seconds, and then attacking from another, convincing the enemy they're facing multiple different versions of the same person. As Tracer, you don't just need to know where the enemy is, or where you're going – you need to remember where you've *been*, how and when to rewind to catch a foe off-guard or snatch a freshly spawned health kit.

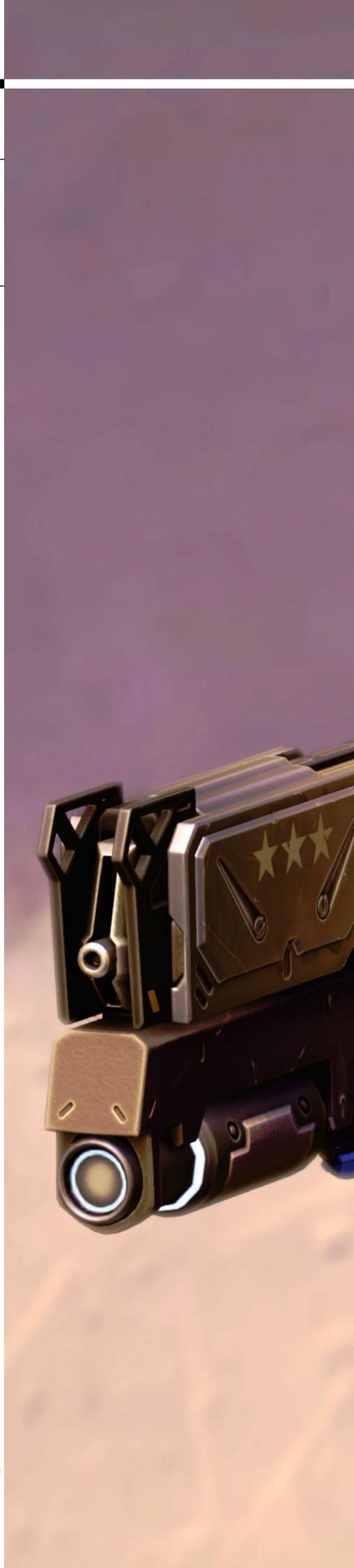
IF YOU CAN PULL THAT OFF IT'S AN AMAZING FEELING. IT'S ALSO KIND OF A DICK MOVE

It's cerebral, challenging, and exciting, and it sells this particular character. Tracer's chirpy cod-Cockney accent grates at first, but then you realise how perfect it is that she's kind of annoying – because she's *incredibly* annoying to fight. My favourite thing to do in the game is dash behind enemy lines, place her sticky bomb on an entrenched defender, rewind, face them and do her 'salute' emote just in time for detonation. If you can pull that off and be included in the 'play of the game' at the end of the match, it's an amazing feeling. It's also kind of a dick move.

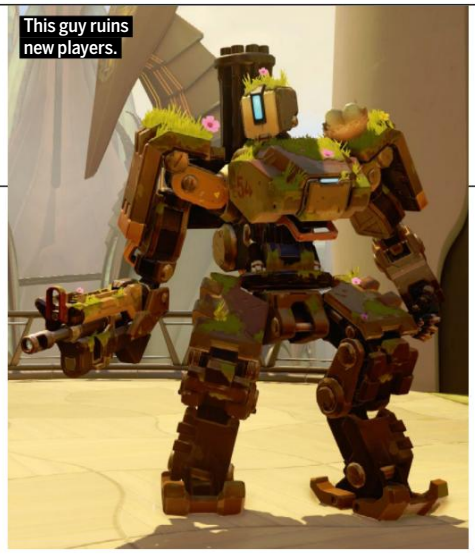
TRICKY UNION

Overwatch's biggest issues, however, come from this genre marriage. They're less to do with the game's systems, which are elegant and clever, and more to do with the way these systems interact with actual human beings. On one hand, you have two types of game – objective-based shooter and MOBA – that both create a lot of interdependency between people. On the other, these genres foster different attitudes to that interdependency. In a shooter, altering your loadout or class mid-mission to suit the situation is normal and accepted. In a MOBA, a character is something you lock in and commit to master over the course of hundreds of matches. *Overwatch*'s problem is it's very much the former type of game, but it looks like the latter.

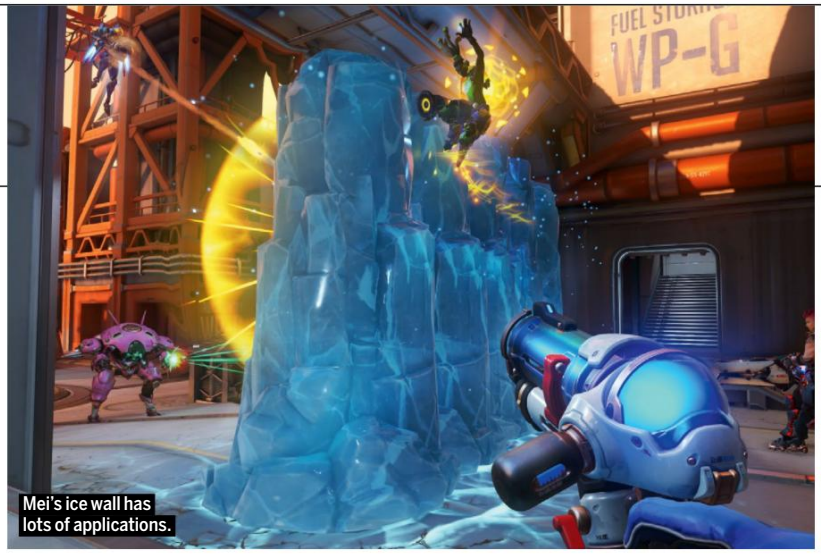
Even in the limited player pool of the closed beta, this can create some agonising situations: trying to push into the last few inches of enemy territory while half your team is determined to play snipers and set up turrets, or trying to hold ground with two Tracers and a couple of Genjis (they added a cyborg ninja with a sword. He's popular. Go figure). Unless you're in a party with enough friends to have a majority influence on your team, it »




RELOAD



This guy ruins new players.



Mei's ice wall has lots of applications.

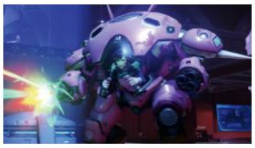


"Eskim-owned!" I yelled, impressing everybody.













sometimes feels like your enjoyment is at the mercy of the matchmaking algorithm.

As the beta progresses, solving the problem of player psychology will be Blizzard's biggest challenge – but it's something the team's aware of. "Hero switching is important to the game and we want to make you feel OK about doing it," says lead designer Jeff Kaplan. "We want to move away from things that just let you lock in and do nothing but play one hero."

My first fears for the game's future were compounded by the (widely held) assumption that it would be free-to-play. At BlizzCon, Blizzard announced that *Overwatch* would be a full-price game, and that its 21 current heroes would amount to a fixed roster, at least for a while. This should shunt public perception of the game away from *Dota* territory and back towards *Team Fortress*, and every time Blizzard has discussed the business model, it's been linked to the importance of encouraging character switching.

"Mei really speaks to me and I think she's adorable and I want to be her," Kaplan says, referring to the newly added defence character Mei, a cheery Chinese cryo-scientist who freezes foes and creates ice walls to protect her allies. "We didn't want players stressing out about, you know, 'How do I get my hands on her?' 'What's the unique formula that I need to do to unlock her?' We really want to encourage hero switching as well, and we felt in models that didn't have all of the heroes available to our players it became very difficult to reinforce this concept of fluidity in the team compositions."

The developer has demonstrated a willingness to change the game radically in pursuit of this goal. Right before BlizzCon, it stripped out *Overwatch*'s progression system – itself the second version of a system that had been overhauled once before. The first allowed you to level up individual characters to customise their abilities, and Kaplan describes it as "a disastrous train wreck." The most recent allowed you to level up individual heroes as in *Heroes of the Storm*. "It encouraged the wrong player behaviour," Kaplan says, citing situations where players wouldn't switch character – even though it might win them the game – because they'd prefer to earn XP on their current hero. "We removed that progression system, which was pretty drastic for us," Kaplan says. "We have a new one – we hope it sees the light of day in early 2016, but we have a lot of work to do first."

"MEI REALLY SPEAKS TO ME AND I THINK SHE'S ADORABLE AND I WANT TO BE HER"

It's encouraging Blizzard isn't treating player behaviour as distinct from game design and it's willing to make sweeping changes to *Overwatch* to combat the fact a multiplayer game's biggest enemy is often that there are *multiple players*. There's a real gem of a competitive shooter, here. It's better and more intelligent than the new *Battlefront* in every way that matters, and it's still in beta – *real* beta, not just a marketing exercise.

Dozens of hours in, I'm back in love with it. With the full complement of 21 characters available, it feels intricately balanced in a way it didn't quite before. Switching character mid-match to counter an enemy composition is very satisfying, and it feels like that sentiment is catching on. You know you're in for a good night when your randomly assigned teammates start tactically switching mid-match, or warp your team's starting composition around one another's choices.

AT ITS BEST

Strategic teamplay here is just as rewarding as being a lone gunman. After playing as the archer Hanzo through a fraught defensive round (they're always fraught), I like to switch to Brazilian DJ Lucio for the attack. He's fast, can wall-run using laser rollerskates, and his ultimate drops the bass in the form of a team-protecting shield. Even though his gun is fiddly to use and his healing power is a passive aura, it's exciting to play him – there's a degree of speed and grace required to keep him in the right position, and profound satisfaction in blitzkrieging the capture point with your team right before dropping that ult in a way that lets the enemy team know they're simply not welcome in their own territory any more.

That's *Overwatch* at its best, and the feeling that'll ultimately (hopefully) justify Blizzard's decision to charge full price for a multiplayer-only game. Perhaps I'll fall out with the game again before then – as each new wave of players joins the beta, more one-sided games are inevitable. I'm now confident, however, that Blizzard knows what this game's potential weaknesses are – and that this beta represents an earnest attempt to address them before you're asked to put your money down.

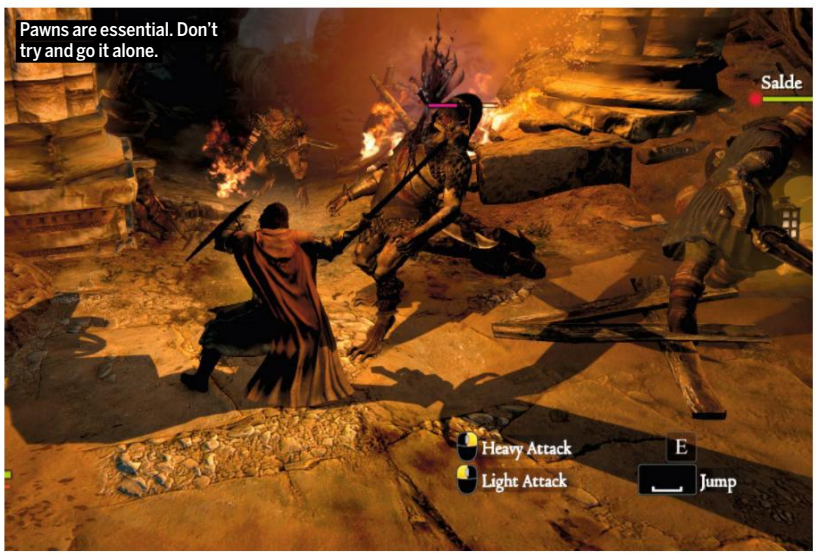
Chris Thursten

Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen

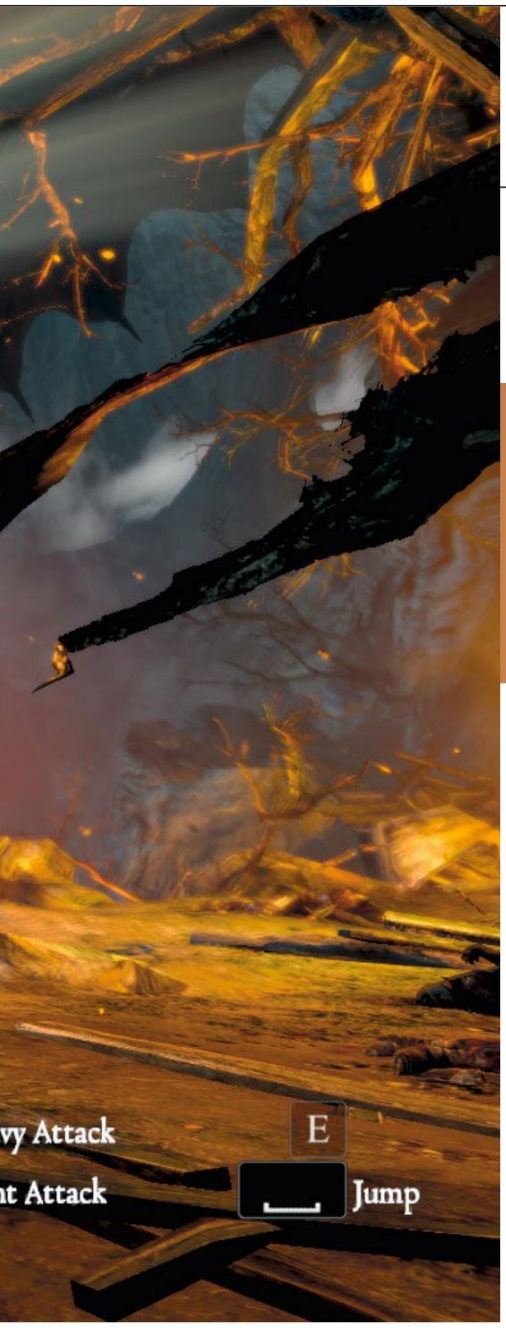


It's your destiny to vanquish this beast.


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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
January 2016	Capcom	In-house	www.dragonsdogma.com

DRAGON'S DOGMA: DARK ARISEN

A distinctly Japanese take on the high-fantasy RPG

A dragon attacks your village and you bravely face it with a rusty sword. As you hack hopelessly at its legs, it plucks out your heart, tossing it into its mouth before flying away. You lie dead on the beach – or so it seems. Waking up, you discover you're The Arisen: a legendary warrior destined to drive the beast back to whence it came. Tough break.

Yes, this is a fantasy RPG, full of beards, wizards, jerkins, and goblins. But it's by a Japanese studio – led by *Devil May Cry* director Hideaki Itsuno – and isn't the fusty old swords-and-elves games you might be expecting. It takes hokey Western fantasy tropes and injects them with humour, personality and some clever game design. *Dragon's Dogma* was released three years ago on consoles to great critical acclaim, but it always felt like a game that belonged on PC – and now, finally, it's coming.

There are perks to being The Arisen, including the ability to summon Pawns – bodyguards who exist solely to aid you in battle. Early on you create a main Pawn, who'll follow you throughout. I created a mage called Queen to accompany my tank-like fighter. She casts a spell in battle that makes my sword burn with magical fire and heals me. She's awesome.

Other Pawns can journey with you too, but only temporarily. You can create them yourself, choose from a selection of computer-generated Pawns, or – and here's the best bit – download them from other players. Pawns who travel with you gain knowledge of the places you visit and, importantly, monsters you defeat. So if you kill a troll, anyone who downloads the Pawns who helped you defeat it will have its weakness revealed. But the more experienced a Pawn is, the more expensive it is to hire. It's a unique system.

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST IMAGINATIVE ACTION RPGS RELEASED IN RECENT YEARS

And you'll need help from Pawns, because *Dragon's Dogma* is tough. There's no indication if a part of the world is beyond your current skills, giving the game a genuine sense of danger and adventure. You'll enter a cave and get wiped out in seconds by some unholy monster. But, later, you'll come back with Pawns who know its weakness and better abilities, and make short work of it. This lack of hand-holding is reminiscent of *Dark Souls*, but it's not quite as punishing.

CLIMBING GAME

The combat also has echoes of *Dark Souls*, emphasising careful parrying and blocking. But unique to *Dragon's Dogma* is the ability to climb on large enemies. You can shimmy up a troll's leg and hack away at its head as it tries to shake you off. Pawns can grab smaller enemies and hold them, giving you a moment to attack. Battles are tactical and any attempts to dumbly hack-and-slash your way through the game will be met with a swift, unceremonious death.

PLAYED IT

Japanese games often suffer from bad PC ports, but the preview version of *Dragon's Dogma* I played boasts a broad selection of graphics options, plays at a steady 60fps, supports high resolutions, and gets rid of the black bars that plagued the console version. I noticed some shadow glitches while using a lamp to light dark areas, but hopefully these will be fixed. I wouldn't say it was a pretty game but the art and animation are so full of character I don't mind its low-poly models and slightly blurry textures too much.

But while *Dragon's Dogma* isn't a visual powerhouse, it is one of the most imaginative action RPGs released in recent years. The Pawn system is a stroke of genius, the combat is satisfying and challenging, with a kinetic, weighty feel to it, and a curiously Japanese sense of humour runs throughout. It's heartening to see the game arrive on PC in such fine shape. That dragon's days are numbered.

Andy Kelly

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Laura squares off against Alpha 3's Karin.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
February 13, 2016	Capcom	In-house	capcom-unity.com

STREET FIGHTER V

Oh, what a feeling, when you're Dhalsim on the ceiling







For the past year, Capcom has been drip-feeding us information about this upcoming instalment in its frankly legendary fighting game series. With fifteen of the sixteen launch characters now set in stone and a worldwide release date of February 13, 2016 on the horizon, it's time to check in again with the latest build of *Street Fighter V*.



One of the main decisions made during development was that every character had to be unique to play – no more Ryu/Ken quasi-palette switches this time around. Leaving out popular characters such as Guile and Akuma for series 'deep cuts' like Karin and R. Mika has made for a much more varied roster, where each character stands out with their own unique pros and cons. Hell, even Ken – forever a slightly different version of Ryu – has been given a complete overhaul. He's now an entirely new character to play, requiring a completely different set of skills to master. Two of the original 'World Warriors' have recently joined the cast: Russian wrestling beast Zangief and tricky, fire-breathing Yoga master Dhalsim, alongside new fighter Laura, the Brazilian grappling ace.

Capcom has been keen to point out that the ruthless timing of combos that *Street Fighter IV* required has been relaxed a bit – no more of those pesky 'one frame' links. This means players are going to be able to do some of the more impressive stuff with a bit less practice, ensuring that the real meat of the game won't be endless, repetitive training mode sessions, but more of the meta-*Street Fighter* game. Namely, figuring out how to fight specific characters with yours, and what moves can be punished with your special moves. This will allow players to concentrate more on reacting to what their opponent is doing, rather than worrying whether or not they actually have the ability to do what they want to do.

THE RUTHLESS TIMING OF COMBOS THAT *SFIV* REQUIRED HAS BEEN RELAXED A BIT

Another interesting aspect is the Capcom Fighters Network, a madly in-depth stat-tracking and social platform set to be a big part of Capcom's commitment to the *Street Fighter* esports scene. You can see stats detailing extremely specific aspects of your game – such as how many hadokens you do per match, or something – and track other players, including those you deem your rivals.

Street Fighter V is going to be a fresh start for experts and beginners alike, so it makes sense that the barrier to entry has been lowered. But Capcom has done so without sacrificing the depth and balance that has made the series the number one fighting game for so long. Esports is such a big deal now, there's never been a better time for a new *Street Fighter* – and it looks like the original competitive scrapper is going to take its place at the top of the heap come release.

Andi Hamilton

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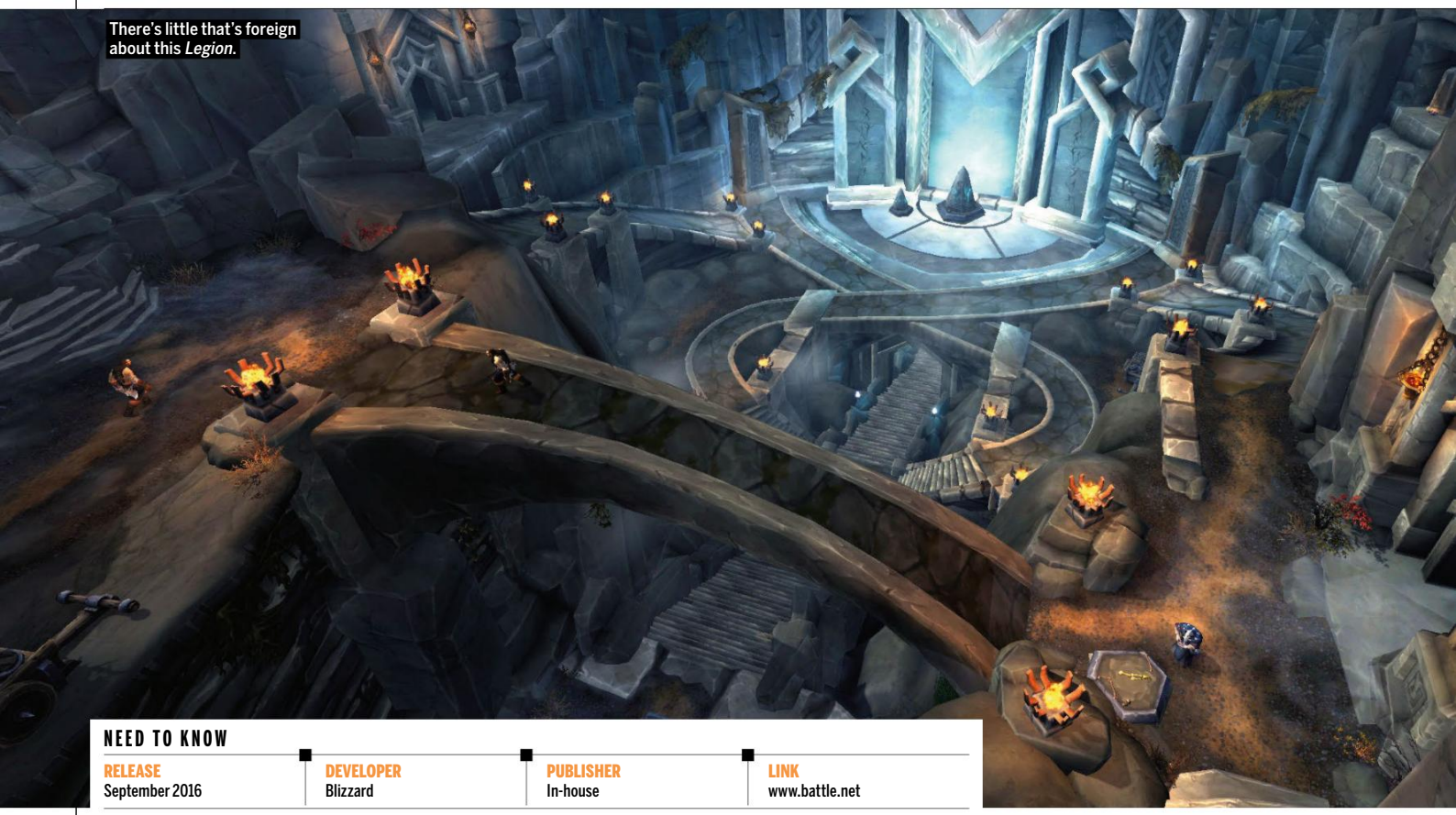
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There's little that's foreign about this *Legion*.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
September 2016	Blizzard	In-house	www.battle.net

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: LEGION

Join the Illidan fanclub in Azeroth's latest adventure





W*arcraft* has changed. The twists and turns of the *Warcraft* story have taken the heroes of Azeroth to some strange places, and pitted them against threats barely hinted at in those three original strategy games. As someone who hasn't played *WoW* seriously since *Cataclysm*, it's clear to me that I'll never catch up with it all.

PLAYED IT

This latest expansion, *Legion*, promises a different type of change. There's a faint air of 'reboot' surrounding *Warcraft* in general at the moment, from the upcoming Duncan Jones movie retelling the story of the very first game to this latest turn for *WoW*, which marches the story forwards and backwards at the same time. Forwards because this is very much a successor to *Warlords of Draenor* and kicks off where that expansion ended. Backwards because it uses *Warlords*' time-travel conceit to not only bring back old arch-enemy Gul'dan, but through him the Burning Legion – the ultimate threat encountered at the end of *Warcraft III* – and Illidan Stormrage, the fan-favourite elven anti-hero famous for insisting, in the strongest terms, that you're not prepared.



I played through the starting experience for *Legion*'s new player class, the Demon Hunter – essentially a great big collective act of Illidan cosplay. Your new character even begins life as the commander of the Illidari, a cross-faction squad of brooding elves who like Illidan so much they named their club after him. I'd have gone with 'Illi-fans', myself.

Kicking off at level 98, you're a melee damage-dealer with powerful ranged magic damage potential embroiled in a war against the Burning Legion in an extra-dimensional demon realm with strong *Diablo* overtones. Demon Hunters can sprout wings to glide after a jump, dash to cross gaps and deal damage, and place heavy emphasis on massive critical hits – landing one discounts the resource cost of your most potent damage ability.

LEGION COULD FINALLY GIVE THOSE DEDICATED LIFERS THE TOYS THEY'VE WANTED

Just in time to deal the killing blow to the Legion's leadership, you're given your metamorphosis power. This lets you leap into the air and smash back down to earth as a smouldering, super-powered demon elf. By the time I reached the boss, I was accompanied by a mob of fellow Illi-fans. The sight of us all transforming was cool and silly all at once: a dilution of one of the series' iconic images, in one way, but also a treat precision-tooled to please fans.

That's *Legion* as a whole, as I see it: indulgent but not unwelcome. It's rare for any game series, let alone a single game, to reach *WoW*'s fine old age. It's earned a victory lap or two. *Legion* could amount to a best of both worlds: a way to draw back former fans with nostalgia, while finally giving those dedicated lifers the toys they've wanted to play with for a decade.

Chris Thursten

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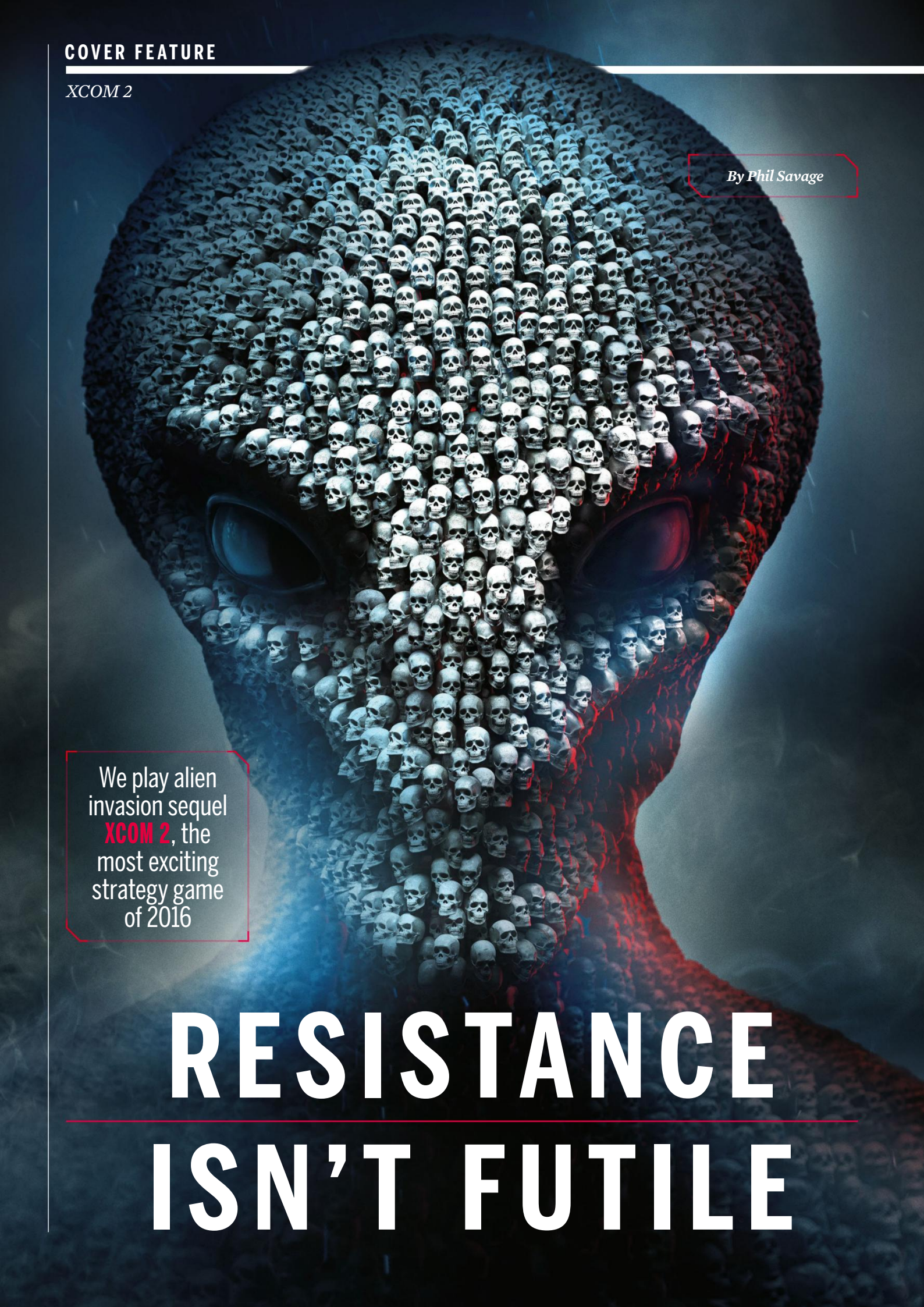
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Designed for XBOX



By Phil Savage

We play alien invasion sequel **XCOM 2**, the most exciting strategy game of 2016

RESISTANCE ISN'T FUTILE



Sectoids are bad news in *XCOM 2*.

I'm in trouble. I need to put a soldier on the back of a flatbed truck, so I can hack the device it's carrying and abscond with the alien secrets inside. As it happens, the truck is on fire. It shouldn't be, but I used a grenade to take out the Advent trooper standing next to it and things sort of got out of hand. I've got three soldiers left – the fourth having died earlier – and I don't want to lose another to a fire I've made them stand in. Sadly, I can't see an alternative, so I pick the XCOM agent with the most health and tell them to burn themselves alive. That's when the Sectoid shows up.

"The aliens are brutal in *XCOM 2*," says lead producer Garth DeAngelis. "I'm really proud of that. If you look at the Sectoid, for instance, of *Enemy Unknown* versus *XCOM 2*, the Sectoid in *Enemy Unknown* could mind-merge and they could shoot their gun. They can shoot their gun in *XCOM 2* as well, but they can also do an attack called 'mind spin', which will panic or disorient you. Or mind control you. That can happen as well. The first alien in the game can mind control you."

That isn't what happens in my playthrough. It's the second mission, and, after battling through Advent troops, I'm now experiencing my first alien encounter. One of my soldiers is







RIGHT: Cities are Advent strongholds. Their citizens won't be sympathetic to XCOM.







RIGHT: Don't lob grenades near this train, unless you want to hack in an inferno.

now on fire. The Sectoid waves a hand, and a psionic purple tendril reaches out to a dead Advent soldier. He gets up. It turns out Sectoids can reanimate people, too. This is bad. The zombie has the drop on my burning soldier. I have been outflanked by a corpse. My soldier is able to take down the reanimated agent, but not before he removes a significant chunk of her health. A turn later, uniform aflame, she succumbs to the fire.

DeAngelis smiles as I recount my experience. "That's great to hear," he says. "You have the Advent administration on the front lines. They're tactically interesting to fight, but we want the surprise – the really cool stuff – to come from these aliens that are emerging from the shadows as the XCOM resistance grows stronger. In this world they've always been behind the scenes. Humanity doesn't really know if the aliens are there or not. They just know there's this Advent administration that are their saviours. And now XCOM is pulling these more sinister aliens to the front, and you have to fight and face them."

CUT LOOSE

Two of my soldiers are dead. The remaining two are critically injured. The Sectoid could finish me off here, but I have a secret weapon: a Ranger. His sword attack is a guaranteed hit, and does huge damage. In any other situation it would be a risk – leaving me out of position, and vulnerable to assault. Here, there are no other enemies. I'm clear to take down my troublesome foe and leave with the remnants of my team. I remember *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* as a game about caution, about sticking to good cover and using overwatch to punish aggressors. In *XCOM 2*, DeAngelis explains, encounters more resemble combat puzzles.



With the right Gremlin upgrade, you can hack Advent mechs.

THE ZOMBIE HAS THE DROP ON MY SOLDIER. I'VE BEEN OUTFLANKED BY A CORPSE

"The battlefield is your playground," he says, "so where do you move? How do you take advantage of cover and flanking? That's the puzzle aspect. Also, predicting what the aliens want to take advantage of. You learn that as you go. You might need to get tongue-pulled a few times before you get the hang of it, but eventually you'll know how to counter that and get in front of it." In short, the aliens are Firaxis's attempt to counter the go-to strategies of *Enemy Unknown* players. Or, to put it another way, to fuck with their fans.

Overwatch still has its place, and has been significantly improved. In the four missions I played, it once again functioned as the cautiously sensible default action – now with the added

WELCOME BACK, COMMANDER *The successes (and failures) of the* XCOM *series*



1994 UFO: ENEMY UNKNOWN
MicroProse's turn-based classic, also known as *X-Com: UFO Defence*.



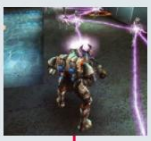
1995 X-COM: TERROR FROM THE DEEP
Exactly the same game as *UFO Defence*, except underwater.



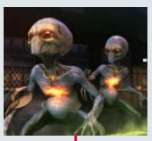
1997 X-COM: APOCALYPSE
Takes the *X-Com* formula and focuses it down to a single cyberpunk city.



1998 X-COM: INTERCEPTOR
X-Com goes to space, and brings all the pop-culture references it can carry.



2001 X-COM: ENFORCER
A bad third-person shooter, with a tenuous connection to *X-Com*.



2012 XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN
Firaxis's reboot brought the strategy back, and was largely excellent.



2013 THE BUREAU: XCOM DECLASSIFIED
A bad third-person shooter, tenuously connected to *XCOM*.



2013 XCOM: ENEMY WITHIN
Enemy Unknown's brilliant expansion. Added robots and gene splicing.



If it's in a glowing capsule, it's probably worth stealing.

bonus that the second soldier in an overwatch chain will no longer attempt to fire on an enemy killed by the first. But the new classes offer a more interesting selection of abilities and upgrades. Better opportunities exist aside from just moving and shooting. Right now, my favourite new class is the Specialist, whose Gremlin drone can hack objects at range and be further upgraded with new assault or defensive options.

PANIC A HACK

These upgrades are invaluable in early battles, when you're in charge of weak-willed rookies prone to freaking out mid-mission. The Specialist's Revival Protocol upgrade – available once they've been promoted to Sergeant – can remove negative status effects, including panic. With it, you can spin a disastrous affliction into a net positive. Later in my hands-on session, a rookie loses it during an encounter with a Viper. He takes an automatic panic shot, hitting the snake lady, but not finishing her off. Using the Gremlin, I remove the effect. The soldier now has a regular full turn with which to finish off his foe. Not that this is a tactic you want to rely on, as panicked soldiers can just as easily grenade the wall you're using as cover – blowing it out and leaving you harmed and exposed.

ENEMIES CAN DROP LOOT THAT SELF-DESTRUCTS AFTER THREE TURNS



The Specialist also saves my skin during a timed mission to hack into an Advent network. I had eight turns, most of which were spent dealing with Advent troops outside a petrol station. When I finally reach the building that houses the terminal, I have one turn remaining, but the only soldier in range of the terminal has been grabbed and bound by a Viper. Fortunately, I realise, I can send in the Gremlin. Hacking a terminal has a guaranteed effect – in this case breaching the network – and also provides a chance of picking up two bonus rewards.

The likelihood of unlocking these bonuses is based on the difference in tech score between the hacker and the terminal they're trying to unlock. I'm offered a permanent bonus to my Specialist's hacking score, and a four week upgrade to my home base's scanning ability. Other potential rewards are more immediate, such as blinding nearby enemies for a couple of turns. I receive nothing – my Specialist's score is too low. Luckily, this time there isn't an associated penalty. Later in the campaign, failed attempts can trigger negative effects.

SPOILS OF WAR

Timed missions aren't *XCOM 2*'s only trick for putting the player under pressure. *Enemy Within*'s Meld resource is gone, but a new loot system takes the same trick and applies it on a smaller scale. Downed enemies have a chance to drop loot that will self-destruct after three turns. That loot takes the form of weapon attachments – everything from scopes that increase aim to repeaters that have a chance to instantly kill a target. It's a bonus less essential and abstract than Meld, but useful enough to be desirable.

The effect is lots of small-scale, focused bursts of risk/reward decision







making. If loot appears at the start of a battle, there's no guarantee it will still be around when it's over. Retrieving it could be disastrous, but better weapons means being better equipped to deal with future missions. Between the new abilities and the external pressures, *XCOM 2*'s challenge isn't just about the brutality of the aliens – although they are brutal. There is also plenty of scope for for shooting yourself in the foot through poor decision choices.

"We wear that as a badge of honour, that it's a challenging game," says DeAngelis. "In fact, we want it to be brutally challenging. We want you to have to overcome those odds, because the sense of triumph is truly powerful. We want players to be able to learn that and earn that on their own."

It's not all failure and disempowerment. In *XCOM 2*, each mission starts with a moment of empowerment – a chance to ambush the enemy and take them out unseen. This concealment phase is in keeping with the idea of XCOM as a guerrilla force. When your soldiers arrive on the map, they're undetected, and will remain so as long as they don't open fire, move too close to the enemy, or create excessive noise by smashing through a door or window. In this way, I'm able to surround a group of Advent, setting the majority of my force to concealment overwatch – a special ambush variant that tells your soldiers to only open fire if detected.





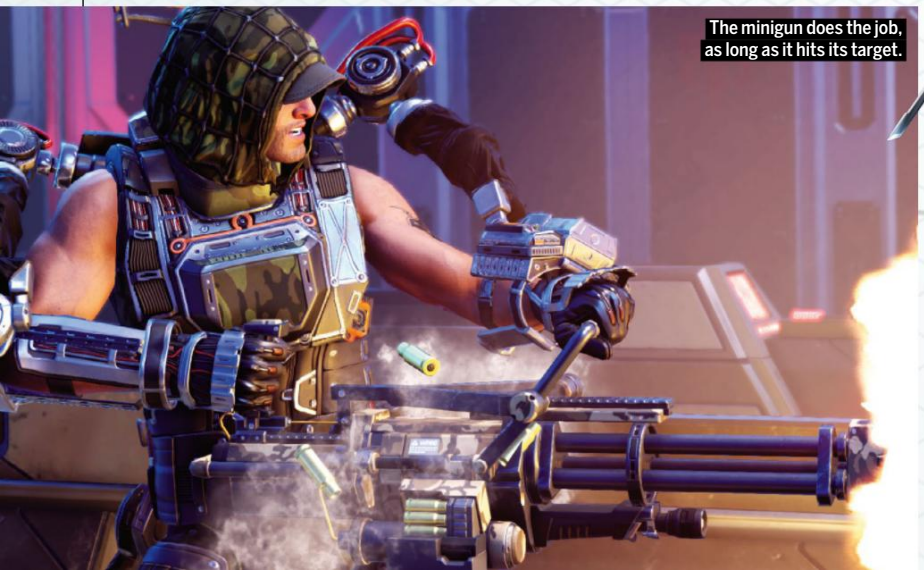
Once the trap is set, I tell my final soldier to attack. This reveals the squad, triggering their overwatch. The entire attack plays as one continuous scene – the camera tracking from soldier to soldier as they take their shot and wipe out the enemy. Concealment only works for the first encounter of each mission, and even then it's easy to mess up. My first ambush failed when I positioned a soldier near some civilians.

"They're scared that there are these humans running around with guns, because they think they're in a utopia," DeAngelis explains to me. "They think they're safe."

ALIEN EXPERIMENTS

The sense I get of *XCOM 2* is that it's more open to experimentation. Its difficulty feels designed to punish ill-judged plans, rather than penalising the player for not following a specific, linear solution. The meta-strategy of the Geoscape is the perfect example of this, in that you can no longer lose the campaign purely based on specific factors. Building a resistance is a very different prospect to stopping an alien vanguard, and that's had a pronounced effect on how you interact with the world. For one thing, there are no longer any satellites to screw you over.

"I think that's why I lost my first playthrough of *Enemy Unknown*,"


The minigun does the job, as long as it hits its target.



THE CAMERA TRACKS FROM SOLDIER TO SOLDIER AS THEY TAKE THEIR SHOT





RIGHT: Procedural generation has a great impact on the challenge presented by each map.



LINE UP

How XCOM 2 *enhances customisation*



FACE
Not sure about those sharp cheekbones? Change them for something else.

HAIR
Choose a do from the huge number of styles and colours. A Fauxhawk, perhaps?

ATTITUDE
Is your soldier too aggressive? Not aggressive enough? Tweak that here.

CLOTHES
You can choose primary and secondary hues of pretty much any colour.





Hacking objectives have a turn-time limit.

DeAngelis says. "I still remember it vividly. There were other ways you could lose, of course, like if you tried the alien base a bit too early, but satellites were something you had to prioritise early. The beautiful thing with *XCOM 2* is I've played through multiple times and it's always like, what do I want to do first? There seem to be a lot of options that could potentially work, or ways I have to adjust based on how the game's panning out."

Failure in *XCOM 2* is tied to something called the Avatar Project. It's represented by a bar at the top of the Geoscape that tracks progress towards something incredibly bad that the aliens are planning. Your strategy lies in balancing the need to grow the resistance against the requirement to stop the aliens from completing their evil masterplan.

FINAL COUNTDOWN

"If I prioritise trying to get to tier two armour first," DeAngelis says, "I'm forgoing building the resistance and finding a new region. That could end up biting me in the ass because I don't have time to get to a facility, and the Avatar progress rose. It's constantly a balance of how do you pull that off, and it feels different every game because the rate of Avatar progress being filled changes every game."

EVERY ASPECT OF *XCOM 2* FEELS LIKE A RESPONSE TO *ENEMY UNKNOWN*

Dark Events similarly mix things up, and feel like an attempt to level the power curve as your squad becomes more effective through research, abilities and new gear. Dark Events function as alien research, and will enhance your foe in a variety of ways. Examples include improved Advent armour and additional reinforcements during missions. Counter-ops will be available to prevent the enemy gaining these upgrades, but again, it ties into the overall Geoscape balance.

Preventing an enemy advantage may come at the cost of completing some equally important project.

It's clear that Firaxis has thought carefully about the particulars of *Enemy Unknown*. Every aspect of *XCOM 2* feels like a response, from the procedural maps that provide longevity over multiple campaigns, to the shifting, broad and open-ended strategy layer, and the opportunity of experimentation that it provides. This isn't a sequel that only offers more of everything that made its predecessor so enjoyable. It's a total rehaul, and an opportunity to take the basic formula and recontextualise it in a way that's well suited to *XCOM*'s punishing difficulty. It's a sequel designed for its fans, and, based on what I've seen, next year's most promising strategy game. ■

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New users get a free tank





World of Tanks received reworked high-definition vehicles, a new Berlin map and a new game mode with its 9.12 update in November. We have two sets of codes for it – one for new users and one for existing users, though new users can redeem both. New players get a free M2 Light Tank for use in the game, while those already playing get six days of free premium account play.

You can download *World of Tanks* at *www.worldoftanks.eu*. These codes only work with EU accounts, and both sets expire on January 20, 2016.

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THE GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2015



It was probably PC gaming's best year in a decade. Here, we celebrate 2015's greatest games.

It's been an extraordinary year for PC games – particularly for giant-scale games from big publishers, but for every other size of developer as well. Here we've selected the year's best, and as we do every year, we've chosen award titles to suit the games rather than the other way around. We hope you enjoyed PC gaming in 2015 as much as we did.



FALLOUT 4

Phil: *Fallout 4* is a comfortable game to play. It's the logical next step for Bethesda's distinct brand of RPG – better in myriad ways, but similar enough that you can instantly get down to the business of shooting, looting and exploring. Some of the RPG elements have been dialed back, but what remains is a deft, enjoyable shooter with an amazing degree of combat customisation.

Beyond that, *Fallout 4*'s great achievement is The Commonwealth. I enjoyed the Capital Wasteland of *Fallout 3*, but, outside of Washington itself, never had a sense of it as a specific place. Boston is writ large throughout The Commonwealth – a dense urban environment that takes centre stage, and is packed full of detail. On the macro level it looks stunning, even while the small-scale graphical fidelity isn't anything to get excited about. It's a world that begs to be discovered, and it's easy to lose hours doing just that.

Chris L: The best stories in games aren't the ones developers tell players, they're the ones players tell themselves and each other. Bethesda RPGs have always given players ample room to ignore the official narrative and create their own characters, histories, motivations and stories, and *Fallout 4* is no exception. When you step out of Vault 111 you'll find plenty of stories waiting for your attention, but not begging for it, leaving you free to come up with your own. Be a hero, a scoundrel, a collector, a craftsman, the leader of a settlement, or just a lone wander. Conquer the wasteland in power armour, sneakily pickpocket every person you meet, or try to get by on charisma and luck. Or, simply build a house and see if you can fill it with melons. Other games may have bigger and more beautiful worlds, but none are so filled with possibilities.

Samuel: There's a tension inherent in exploring *Fallout 4*'s environment that is entirely unique to Bethesda's 3D interpretation of this series. It's the fear and excitement of the unknown, of picking through the wastes and seeing what remains of a land once dominated by mankind. I'll admit that I was a bit disappointed by the downtown part of Boston, with its fairly blank streets, but it's in the outskirts of the city – containing miniature settlements, curious structures in the distance and unsettling remnants of a natural landscape – that the seven-year leap over *Fallout 3* is most keenly felt. I love how messed up the creature designs are now, too – walking through an abandoned supermarket is suddenly as jumpy and enjoyable as playing *Left 4 Dead*.

Chris T: A slow start almost put me off, but settlement-building is the best new feature in a Bethesda RPG in years. The Commonwealth is an evocative place, made moreso by the sense that parts of it are truly and uniquely mine.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
A brilliant and massive sandbox, albeit largely the same one that Bethesda has been making for years.

SCORE
88%



PERSONAL PICK



Samuel Roberts

D4: DARK DREAMS DON'T DIE

D4 was the first game to give me Firefly-style cancellation heartbreak. It's a three-episode arc of fun QTE murder mystery with entertaining characters that just ends, with no hint of resolution. Like *Deadly Premonition*, it's pretty offbeat, but *D4* focuses on story, densely packed interactive settings and its charming cast, and is a better game for it. It's reminiscent of Telltale's work, but I don't think there's any part of *D4* that could be replicated by another developer.

PERSONAL PICK



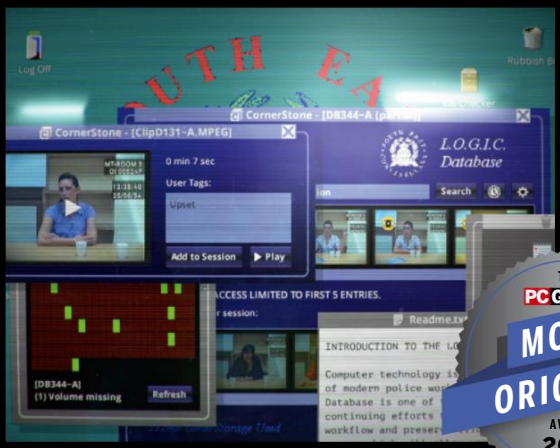
Phil Savage

GUILD WARS 2: HEART OF THORNS

Guild Wars 2 is my favourite MMO, but *Heart of Thorns*' success goes deeper than providing more of it to play. It restructures the game in clever ways, and provides systems of progression that aren't tied to levels or loot. It also doubles down on the effortless event system that rewards ad-hoc cooperation between players. Each new map has its own meta-event, funnelling players towards huge, shared challenges. It feels like what an MMORPG ought to be: hundreds of players, working together.









THE PC GAMER MOST ORIGINAL AWARD 2015

HER STORY

PERSONAL PICK



Tyler Wilde

UNDERTALE

You don't have to kill anyone in this low-fi adventure into the realm of the monsters (who are actually pretty affable), but you can. If that's all you know about it going in, I'd suggest keeping it that way: *Undertale* delights in surprising you. It's heartfelt, clever, and funny – though often not nearly as cheerful is it seems – and plays with the RPG genre in wonderfully devious ways, taking the little things you do more seriously than you know. The writing is sharp, the characters imaginative, and the music will fill you with a sense of real determination.

PERSONAL PICK



Wes Fenlon

GALAK-Z

If the developers of '90s space shooters such as *R-Type* and *Gradius* had been able to code complex physics and AI, they would've made something pretty damn close to sci-fi roguelike *Galak-Z*. I love the acrobatic dance between firing and dodging using forward, reverse, and side thrusters. A few seconds of sloppy play can wipe you out, but weaving through a cloud of enemy lasers is immensely satisfying. Leading hungry space bugs into a patrol of pirates and watching the AI tear itself apart is one of my favourite gaming experiences this year.

Samuel: This is a terrific detective game with a neat format that allows players to actually solve the mystery themselves, by questioning a woman about a possible murder. Like many people, I played this in one intense evening, and feeling the pieces of the story slotting into place based on my own intuition was so rewarding. The entire mystery rests on actor Viva Seifert's ability to bring the 'her' in question to life, and she gives a performance that is more than a little unsettling, so much so that you're not sure where the truth begins and ends until you've trawled through every last VHS in search of answers. The worst feeling is walking away from *Her Story* and realising that it'll be years before anyone makes a mystery game this good again.

Andy: *Her Story* is a rare example of a detective game that makes you feel like a detective. Digging through those old VHS tapes, piecing the story together, it felt like I was uncovering a genuine mystery. Even though your path through the story is nonlinear, determined by the search terms you use, it feels almost like it's scripted. There were twists, revelations, and shocking moments – and they were all unique to me. A brilliantly creative form of interactive storytelling that wouldn't be possible in any other medium.

Chris T: This is such a staggeringly ambitious game, but so simple. It's a puzzle game about your ability to intuit deeper meaning from ambiguous and seemingly innocuous statements, with a bulletproof script that manages to be both natural-sounding and invested with meaning. It then, bravely, hangs the entire game off a single actor's performance. It might have worked – and been easier to achieve – as a text adventure, but Viva Seifert's work here is what makes *Her Story* so powerful. It's intimate, personal, and deeply human in the way only real footage of a real person can be. It would've been so easy to get wrong, but Barlow and Seifert got it so, so right.

Chris L: This is the first time I've ever found myself wishing a game was episodic. If there was a new chapter of *Her Story* every month, I'd be in heaven. The story had some stumbles but the format was perfect.

Phil: By delivering the story in short, nonlinear clips, *Her Story* seeds its revelations in a fascinating way. At first, I was writing down the names and places referenced; building a list of search terms to poke and prod at. Then I hit upon a term that jumped me to the end of the interview – Seifert's character acting completely differently, hinting at things I didn't have the context to understand. The story morphed into something much darker. *Her Story* isn't just a game about uncovering a mystery, but also about piecing that mystery together in your own mind. It trusts the player's intelligence in a way few games are prepared to do.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
An atmospheric, captivating crime thriller with an interactive story that unravels differently for every player.

SCORE
90%





THE PC GAMER COMMUNITY CHAMPION AWARD 2015

CITIES: SKYLINES

Chris L: 2013's *SimCity* was an ugly exercise in what not to do. With online-only play, strict limits on city size, and no mod support, EA frustrated and angered fans of the city building genre. Thankfully, the tiny Finnish development team of Colossal Order stepped in to carry the torch while deftly avoiding all of EA's blunders. Offline play means no worrying about servers or connections, yet there's still a communal feel to *Skylines* thanks to extensive mod and asset support, which means players can easily download the custom creations of others (now exceeding 60,000 in number), including a mod that expands the already large buildable area. In fact, there's even a mod in the works for multiplayer support! See, we like online play, when it's optional.

Colossal Order also listened to player feedback, later adding a much-missed day/night cycle (alongside paid DLC) and the ability to tunnel underground. Most importantly, *Skylines* understands what still seems to elude some publishers: mod support is healthy for both sides of the equation. It extends the lifespan of the game, keeps people talking about it months after release, can increase sales, and lets players fix problems, tweak it to their liking, and contribute and share their own work and creativity with others.

Tyler: I spoke to *Cities: Skylines* lead designer Karoliina Korppoo earlier this year, and she told me that the development team uses popular mods as inspiration for official updates. What a lovely, symbiotic relationship: modders make the game more fun for everyone, and Colossal Order can direct its update efforts toward the most desired changes and additions by taking that feedback onboard.

The whole thing – the game, the mods, Colossal Order's patches and *After Dark* add-on – is about as PC gaming as you can get. On an open platform, no one has to settle. If we want to add something to a game, we mod it in. If we think it would look nice with a bluish tint, we inject one. And if it just isn't the game we want (and launches about as well as my first *Kerbal Space Program* rocket), a small developer steps in and makes the game they wanted to play. If there's passion for something, it'll find its way to the PC, the way *Xenonauts* recalled classic *X-Com*, *Black Mesa* brought us back to *Half-Life 1*, and *Cities: Skylines* gave us a city simulator without overzealous online aspirations.

And aside from how well *Cities* has served a community hungry for a better city builder, it's just a good game. It's not especially challenging – you might try *Prison Architect* for that – but it's full of little details to manage and soothes me into a creative rhythm of balancing and designing and building that can last hours. It's exactly the feeling I want from a city builder.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
A handful of flaws, but this fun and addictive city-builder still climbs high.

SCORE
86%







THE PC GAMER BEST SIMULATION AWARD 2015

KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

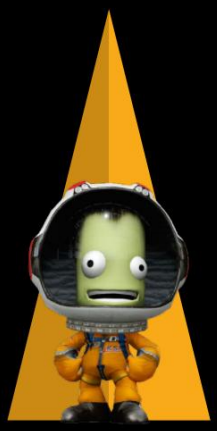
Phil: Part physics sandbox; part management sim; part soaring love letter to one of humanity's greatest achievements. In *Kerbal Space Program*, you build rockets and send little green astronauts into space. That's the aim, but *Kerbal* makes you work for it. The underlying game design is based on the real-world principles of gravity, mass and thrust. It's ridiculously complex if you're targeting peak efficiency, but, as it turns out, you can simply brute force a solution by adding more rockets. *Kerbal*'s great trick is that it's an educational game that doesn't explain anything. You learn by doing, building a working knowledge of its systems – and thus, the actual, real-world considerations required to send things into space – over countless hours of entertaining failure, revision and success. It's fun to watch your craft buckle and collapse during a maiden voyage, and it arms you with the knowledge necessary to go back to the drawing board and try again.

If we gave awards to early access games, *KSP* could've been a contender over any of the past few years. It started well, and only grew better with subsequent patches. Now, despite technically having been released this year, it enjoys the benefit of years of community feedback, iterated features, and an enormous number of mods. It's a massive physics playground that the developer and community continue to fill with new toys.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
A perfect blend of science and slapstick, and a robust and compelling sandbox of possibility. Simply outstanding.

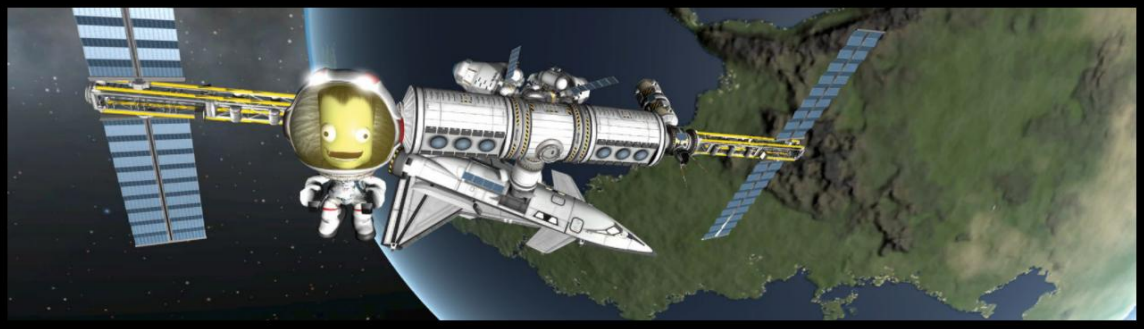
SCORE
96%

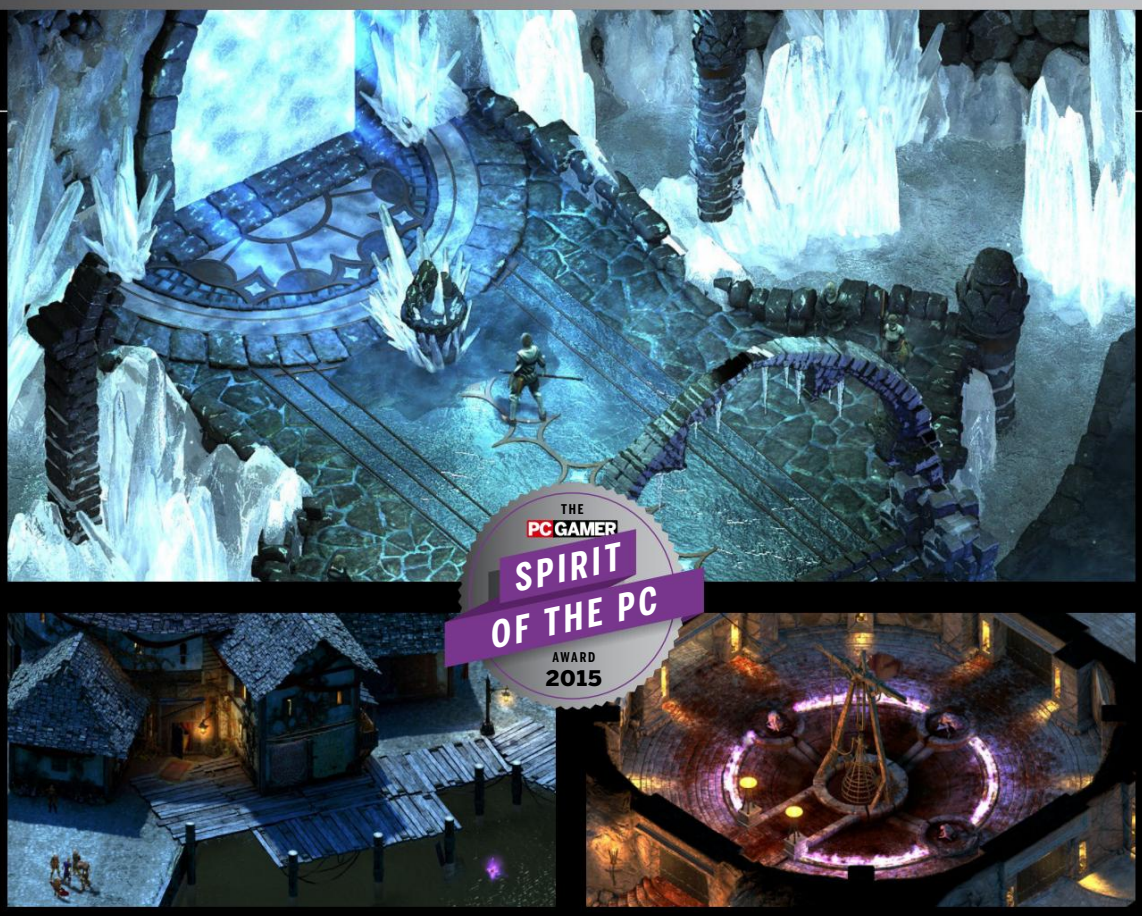


Tom S: A brilliant sandbox game that simulates one of the most exciting endeavours humans have attempted. *Kerbal* captures the technicalities of spaceflight on a micro and a macro level. Trajectories must be planned with fine precision. Vehicles must be launched and combined in orbit with tremendous finesse, but once you've nailed the micro stuff, you get to sit back and watch your Kerbals cross vast distances, slingshotting themselves around planets to reach faraway moons. When a mission's going well *Kerbal* evokes the awe of space travel, but it's funny too. When a spacewalk goes wrong and a Kerbal drifts off into the dark, the horror is softened by the stupid expression on its little green face.

I love watching the missions and builds that have been put together by much better players than I. Some have painstakingly recreated real rockets from the space race. Others have created extraordinary launch sequences and docking procedures. One player made a giant robot that would catch rockets as they launched and turn them upside down, sending them nose-first into the dirt. Why? Because you can. That's the sort of freedom the very best sims allow.

As Phil mentioned, it's a great platform, too. Buy the game once and you get access to years of support and new features from modders and fans who want *Kerbal* to become more than a space sim. It's huge, and it's only going to get bigger.





PILLARS OF ETERNITY

Andy: Steeped in RPG history – from *Baldur's Gate* to *Planescape: Torment* – *Pillars of Eternity* takes the best of those old Infinity Engine games and gives it a modern sheen. Featuring beautifully descriptive writing and fun, tactical combat, this is one of the best PC roleplayers in years. The way your party's skills complement each other makes battles a thrill as you stack and combine their abilities to cleverly outsmart the challenging enemies, while the world Obsidian has created gives the usual high fantasy tropes a dark edge and the feel this could have been based on some forgotten D&D campaign.

Tom S: *Pillars* could so easily have been a nostalgia trip that simply copied the Infinity Engine games of old. Instead, it improves them. Combat breaks away from the conventions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, allowing for clever new class concepts like the Cipher, who can manipulate the souls of enemies. It's smartly written, too, using little text adventure skits to add flavour and detail that the elevated camera would otherwise be unable to show. Kickstarter backers are immortalised as NPCs, and each has a short story that you can read using your character's rare psychic powers. It's a fun reward for those loyal enough to fund the project, but it also makes the world feel rich and full of character.

It only works on PC, where players are able to read a lot of text up-close on a high-resolution screen. *Pillars* is part RPG, part fantasy novel. The choice to have characters voice only a line or two from each speech allows for more detailed exchanges, bolstered by descriptive interludes that pluck at the imagination. The result is a long, absorbing roleplaying game that recognises the heritage of the great Infinity Engine RPGs without being subsumed by them.

Chris T: Like going home at Christmas to discover that somebody has prepared all of your favourite food for days, the movies you watched as a kid are on and somebody's unearthed a bunch of dog-eared fantasy paperbacks from your past. And a bottle of whisky. I want to curl up inside *Pillars of Eternity* and live there.

Tony: *Pillars* recaptures the dizzying sense of excitement I felt when I first played *Baldur's Gate* 15 years ago: "oh my God, there's a whole *world* in here." It's not just that every map is another vast Brueghelesque canvas to explore, or that every book you click on explodes a hand grenade of made-up history in your face. It's not even the screens full of backstory and character hiding behind almost every NPC you talk to. It's the realisation that the game is going to *keep on doing this* – for as long as you've got the patience to keep on unlocking new areas or choosing the "leave it to me!" option when someone offers you a quest. *Eternity*? They're not joking.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
A deep, rich, and wonderfully written RPG that lives up to the towering legacy of the games that inspired it.

SCORE
92%



PERSONAL PICK



Tom Senior

HOMEWORLD REMASTERED

Old games with no digital edition face a worrying future, as copies dwindle and eBay prices soar, they risk being lost to history. *Homeworld* was simply too good to die. Gearbox took Relic's classic space RTS games, buffed them up for modern PCs and re-released them. They still hold up wonderfully. They're beautiful, challenging strategy games that tell a surprisingly affecting space opera tale. Everyone should be able to enjoy the sight of the mothership drifting through nebulae as Adagio For Strings plays, and now everyone can.

PERSONAL PICK



Chris Thursten

LIFE IS STRANGE

This is a game that, like its teenage protagonists, can be awkward and doesn't always get everything right. It's an adventure game about a highschooler, Max, who discovers she can rewind time. This leads her and best friend Chloe into a mystery with shades of Veronica Mars and Twin Peaks, an exploration of a lonely Pacific Northwestern town and the (cough) strange lives of the people who live there. *Life is Strange* has its weaker moments, but it's also romantic, dramatic, touching and unlike anything else released this year.



THE PC GAMER BEST GAME DESIGN AWARD 2015

INVISIBLE, INC.

PERSONAL PICK



Andy Kelly

ELSE HEART. BREAK()

This was the weirdest game I played in 2015, but also the most original. Part point-and-click adventure, part open-world city sim, and part puzzle game, it sees you move to a new town and join a group of hackers fighting a dystopian government. It's set in a world where bits have replaced atoms, almost any object can be hacked and its properties changed. Tired? Hack a glass of water to give you an energy boost. Need to get across town? Hack a door to take you right there. I've never played anything quite like *Else Heart.Break()*.

PERSONAL PICK



Tom Marks

HEROES OF THE STORM

MOBAs can be complex, threatening games. They have dozens of characters with unique abilities to learn, item stores filled with wrong choices to make, and a mountain of game mechanics to scale. But *Heroes of the Storm* manages to emphasise everything that makes a MOBA fun while reworking or removing the things that make them intimidating. Learning how to play *HotS* never felt like doing homework, it just felt like playing a game. It's a MOBA I could enjoy right away – and one that I don't need to devote my life to continuing to enjoy.

Chris T: I feel like I've written this line a dozen times already, but: *Invisible, Inc.* is the best designed game this year and if you disagree with me I will fight you. On a turn-based basis. In a room divided into a big grid with lots of cover. With slowly recharging, non-lethal weaponry. This is a game that not only combines the stealth sim, tactical strategy game and roguelike successfully, but does it in a way that solves a bunch of problems with all of those sources.

To the stealth sim, it introduces completely transparent rules. You always know what your options are, what the likely results of your actions will be, and your choices are always mitigated by resources that you have complete control over. There's no chance failure, and very little trial and error. You either learn to make all of these totally fair systems dance, or you fail.

To the tactical strategy game, it introduces a one-sided power dynamic that creates drama and moments of heroism. You're an intruder, controlling a small group of operatives trying to find a gap in a mega-corporation's vast physical and digital armour. Every little thing you take is a victory, and every last-ditch escape is a triumph. Firepower doesn't mean very much, so it doesn't suffer from the old *XCOM* problem of getting easier as you get further in. Finally, as a roguelike it dodges repetition by giving you a choice of agents and powers that substantially change the character of each new campaign. You don't end up repeating early levels over and over in the hope that you'll get lucky because 'getting lucky' is never the point: learning is, developing the loadouts and strategies that you're comfortable with and that you know how to use. Unlike XP or credits or items, 'learning' isn't something you loot by chance. It's something you're always gaining, however you choose to play, and as such it's always rewarding to do so.

Phil: *Invisible, Inc.* can feel brutal. It tempts you into tough situations, stoking your greed and then punishing you for it. Failure is an omnipresent thing, and can be disastrous for your campaign. What makes *Invisible, Inc.* brilliant is that these failures are never random. It's a turn-based strategy game in which your actions aren't defined by dice rolls. The difficulty isn't tied to chance, but to decision making. Get into a tricky spot and, more often than not, it's possible to turn things around by thoroughly thinking through your current situation.

More than in *XCOM*, or similar games where safe plays are rewarded, *Invisible, Inc.* encouraged me to use my character's full breadth of abilities – finding interesting ways to escape the fine mess that I'd got myself into. It's a perfectly executed heist game – giving long odds and high stakes, but providing you with the tools to subvert its hostile environments in your favour.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
Engrossing tension between empowerment and disempowerment, greed and fear, across an eminently replayable system.

SCORE
80%







THE PC GAMER BEST SINGLEPLAYER AWARD 2015

THE WITCHER 3

Shaun: A strange thing happened when I was playing this. When someone spoke to me I listened. When a cutscene played I didn't mash my keyboard in search of the 'skip' button. When Geralt faced a difficult decision, I stared at the wall and thought about it. Many other RPGs hit that sweet spot for players more patient than I, but it's my belief that CD Projekt RED hits it better than anyone else. Sitting down to an evening of *The Witcher 3* feels like diving into a meticulously written fantasy novel. It's one of the most rugged, despairingly bleak yet oddly beautiful worlds I've ever explored, and is packed with more quests than I'll ever get time to finish.



Andy: I tried and failed to get into the first two games, but this is the one that clicked. In terms of quests, it's one of the best RPGs I've played. The writing, characters, locations and lore combine to create compelling side-quests. It was 'Family Matters', the tale of the troubled Bloody Baron and his wife and daughter, that really made me love the game. It has everything that makes *The Witcher 3* great: fantastic voice acting, gruesome monsters, tough moral decisions. From the snowy islands of Skellige to the grand city of Novigrad, the world is as vividly realised as its characters. Exploring on horseback, helping people and taking on mercenary work made me feel like a wandering samurai.





THE PC GAMER BEST WRITING AWARD 2015

80 DAYS



Andy: It's one of the best things I've ever read, in any medium, painting a vivid picture of a technologically advanced alternate Victorian history. Not only are the descriptions of the places you visit rich and evocative, but it has heart too.
Wes: At first I made decisions purely to get from one city to another as fast as possible. Slowly I began to discover how a chain of those decisions could lead to an encounter with an international jewel thief, or a living airship that would fly me halfway across the world, or put me in the clutches of literature's most famous submarine captain.
Chris T: After you've played it a few times, go directly north. Don't ask questions, just go north and don't stop. That's the joy of *80 Days*, for me: it has secrets and sideplots like no other interactive fiction I know. Every play really is a journey into the unknown.





THE PC GAMER BEST GAME OF 2013 AWARD 2015

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Samuel: *GTA V* was late coming to PC, but the port was worth the wait – this is the definitive version of a game I first played two years ago. Which is why it's been given this particular award, to be honest. That extravagantly realised world will likely never be topped by anyone but Rockstar itself, and while there's been a fair bit of backlash over the story mode being let down by unlikable characters, I was entertained by the leads, and the singleplayer missions are some of the best fun you can have in any game. From the dynamically lit Los Santos skyline to the ocean at dusk, I can't believe someone created a game environment this lavish. I'm not so keen on the chaotic playground of *GTA Online*, but even so, the multi-part heist missions, which I played with some of the other PCG guys, were some of my highlights from the year, too.

Chris L: Rare is the game in which a quick drive to the clothing store to buy a new suit can lead to an extended session of freeform mayhem and destruction. Sideswipe the wrong driver and attract the attention of the cops, and a highway chase results. Flip your vehicle off a bridge, steal another, speed to a helicopter pad, swipe a chopper, get shot down over a military base, parachute to the beach, steal a boat, jump it onto a busy street, enjoy a shootout with more cops, escape to the hills on a motorcycle, and get killed by a mountain lion. What was I doing an hour ago? Oh, yeah, right, I was going to buy a suit.

For me, *GTA V* is about what you do between the things you're supposed to be doing. Long after the details of the story have faded, Los Santos will remain a big, beautiful world perfect for hours of chaotic and ridiculous fun.

Chris T: I had such a strange time reviewing this. It's the most extraordinary open world, a vast and immersive city that houses a freeform driving game, a lightweight flight simulator, a racing game, a shooter, a tennis sim, and so on and so on. I couldn't stand the story or the characters and wish Rockstar would reclaim some of the heart that *GTA IV* and *Red Dead Redemption* had, but it's a testament to the team's overall achievement that *GTA V* is still *so good* despite that 40-hour campaign being so derivative and cynical. Multiplayer remains a game where you can kidnap your friends inside their cars in a helicopter with a big magnet. All is forgiven, and then some.

Phil: Los Santos is such a robust city, and the perfect setting for experiences both big and small. I love driving through it at night, listening to my custom soundtrack (Kavinsky, of course) just as much as I love the chaos and last-ditch saves of a successful multiplayer heist. For all the bluster of the campaign, *Grand Theft Auto V*'s strength is in how it comfortably scales to whatever you want to do.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
A sandbox of extraordinary scope created with a masterful attention to detail. A patchy campaign doesn't spoil this wonderful, evocative city.

SCORE
92%







ROCKET LEAGUE

Samuel: Simple and brilliant, *Rocket League* was one of my main obsessions this year, and the first competitive game I truly became absorbed by. I've had so much heartache in ranked, but so many wonderful goals, near-misses and epic saves, too. While everyone I know has pretty much stopped playing at this point, the five-minute matches are a perfect break between other games that require a bigger time commitment. It's a well-deserved success for Psyonix, even though I hate this game (and also love it). And fuck the DeLorean.

James: I should probably get a chair without wheels. No other game has elicited an involuntary kick from both legs at once. It's always as I speed up towards the ball after watching a play unfold. I'll likely miss, kick the floor as if it will somehow correct my virtual car's velocity, and send me rolling towards the back of my room, blurting a word or two I shouldn't. It's exhilarating. *Rocket League* is the only sports game with controls that aren't abstracted by layers and layers of game mechanics. You drive fast, jump, and hit the ball. There's a real sense of precise control over a body, similar to 'control' in a real sport, which means behaviours and plays form naturally. Car football is the most natural expression of a sports game ever. Who would've guessed?

Chris T: The fact that 'football, but with cars' doesn't feel like a novelty is extraordinary. Instead, it feels like a real sport: somewhere between destruction derby, hockey and football, with instantly intuited rules but a vast skill ceiling. It's brilliant. My only regret is that real physics won't allow it to become real. The other thing that I love about *Rocket League* is that, through it, I've had the chance to watch Sam encounter all of the horrible things about serious competitive play: ladder anxiety, rage at matchmaking, utter disappointment, bad-mannered teammates, and so on. I thought his refusal to play *Dota 2* ever again would save him from my particular part of this hobby, but fortunately it hasn't – and I'm delighted.

Phil: I live deep in the depths of bronze league – a world where six cars flip towards a stationary ball and all miss. We bronze leaguers might understand the flow and beauty of the game, but we don't have the technical expertise to translate it into action. We're having fun anyway – except that one guy who sarcastically spams "nice shot" and then leaves if you so much as concede a goal. I treat *Rocket League* as an enjoyable, knockabout arcade game. It's still tense as I'm barrelling towards the goal mouth, and still amazing when the ball explodes in a shockwave of success, but I also don't feel bad when I lose one of the five-minute matches. Within seconds, I'm loading into another game – ready to suck at *Rocket League* all over again.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
Rocket League is fast, fun and relentlessly enjoyable. The best football game without feet.

SCORE
87%



PERSONAL PICK



James Davenport

CIBELE

In *Cibele*, an old-school MMO clickfest sets the stage for an intimate drama. You play Nina, a 19-year-old amid social and sexual change. The mundanity of click-killing countless enemies evokes the desperation for connection and validation many have experienced growing up in a digital age, so it's no surprise she forms a relationship with another player. It's an intensely personal drama, and feels like living through an hour of someone's slightly abstracted life via a desktop. It's somewhat eerie how *Cibele* nails the feeling of coming of age in online spaces.

PERSONAL PICK



Tony Ellis

SOMA

When it's not trying to be a horror game, *Soma* is a fascinating and original world to explore. Even more than *Alien: Isolation*'s space station, its undersea facility feels like a real, lived-in place, only recently deserted. It's a feeling made all the more poignant by the knowledge that a mass-extinction event has wiped out all life on the surface of Earth. You're the last lonely man (sort of), and you're at the bottom of the sea, reading other people's emails and piecing together a story that had already played itself out weeks before you arrived on the scene.







THE PC GAMER GAME OF THE YEAR AWARD 2015

METAL GEAR SOLID V THE PHANTOM PAIN

Samuel: As a friend of mine put it recently, it was always the systems that made *Metal Gear* special, not the story. But the time of *Metal Gear Solid* as a story-heavy series truly ended with *MGS4* – this is a new era of *Metal Gear*, one where the focus lies in user-generated stories created by throwing together game mechanics in two massive open worlds. *The Phantom Pain*'s suite of military toys starts big then simply expands, over the course of many missions, offering the player more and more options with which to mess with enemies. I've called in airstrikes on bears, stuck numerous tanks on balloons, and patted my dog for reassurance while being hunted by mechs, helicopters and squads of men. It's so good that I can't quite believe this game has been made in my lifetime. I've played 70 hours of *Metal Gear Solid V* and I'm almost certain there's about 40 hours worth of stuff yet to find. What could I have possibly done to deserve a game this good?

Metal Gear Solid V is just so far ahead of other action games. Kojima Productions retained the series' detail and sense of humour, but found more ways to convey that with unscripted moments. *MGSV* is so thoroughly divorced from its boring story that you can enjoy the game without going near it. It's left games such as *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* looking pretty tired in its wake. If Konami doesn't follow this up with a sequel of a similar standard with yet more systems and new environments, I'll be furious. There's a foundation here for brilliant sequels. *Metal Gear* is the king of sandbox games, and this was the perfect time for the series to come back to PC.

Andy: One of the best stealth games I've ever played, *Metal Gear Solid V* is a rich, complex web of interlinking systems tied to slick, responsive controls. Gazing across an enemy base at night in the vast Afghan desert, planning your attack, then adapting as it all goes inevitably go wrong – these things are the most fun I've had this year in terms of pure *play*. This is an incredibly polished, tightly designed game, with imaginatively designed gadgets that let you mess with the AI in endlessly entertaining ways. As a *Metal Gear* fan, I felt the story was a letdown and weirdly half-baked, but in light of that amazing stealth sandbox, I can't really complain.

Phil: *Metal Gear Solid V* might not be the most obvious choice for a PC publication's game of the year, but I think it's the right choice for PC Gamer. If you look at our last few Games of the Year – *Spelunky* and *Alien* – I think the theme is expertly crafted worlds that house surprising, delightfully emergent systems that clash together in chaotic and playful ways. *The Phantom Pain* is definitely that. Like Andy, I'm a huge *Metal Gear Solid* fan, but I've barely touched the story. My time has been spent wandering Afghanistan, completing side-ops and liberating resources. It's an excuse to slip in and out of outposts, planning out routes and approaches, then being forced to improvise if (and when) I'm discovered. It's an amazing world to manipulate, and filled with so many toys that every visit promises something new. It's both an expertly crafted stealth game and a fun, satisfying action game – rewarding both the meticulous and the frivolous with an expanding, upgradeable set of tools that make both styles of play equally gratifying.

Chris T: I hadn't touched a *Metal Gear* game in over 15 years, so *The Phantom Pain*'s weaknesses as a sequel (or prequel, I suppose) didn't mean much to me. Instead, I was surprised to encounter one of the best systems-driven stealth games in years, one where creativity is relentlessly rewarded and encouraged and also where there is a dog with a knife who stabs people.

One of my favourite feelings in gaming is when I realise that I'm not a slave to the game's logic, but my own. Games cut so many corners that it's easy to assume that certain things just won't work: blowing up a vehicle that's later scheduled to rescue a key target, for example, would probably cause an insta-fail in any given *Call of Duty*. Here, the game is designed to react to you doing that, to shape itself around your decisions rather than force you to change to suit it. For that reason, *Metal Gear Solid V* is in another league.

WHAT WE SAID

OUR VERDICT
A generous stealth sandbox masterpiece that'll delight both new and existing fans of *Metal Gear*.

SCORE
93%



PERSONAL PICK



Shaun Prescott

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

2015 was the year I got fed up with 2D platformers. Silhouettes of 8- and 16-bit pixels are seared into my retinas thanks to the onslaught, but *Ori and the Blind Forest* was different. For one, its Metroidvania level design was actually put to great use – *Ori*'s new powers are fun and fluid to play with, even in familiar environments. Many praised it for its beautiful art and melancholy story, but for me, it simply nails the rawest component of a good platformer: its sense of movement and momentum were perfect.

PERSONAL PICK



Chris Livingston

PRISON ARCHITECT

In this game I found the satisfaction of familiar management tasks – planning and building, power and water, budgets and schedules – with the cool twist that your citizens don't want to be there. Your inmates have their own economy – contraband – and their own plans – escape, primarily. Managing a population whose needs may be met but who will still hate you can be an engrossing and unsettling challenge. Overcrowding in a city builder can be a problem, but here it can result in a bloody riot and half the prison burning down.


RIPJAWS V
RIPJAWS V
SAMSUNG
Solid State Drive

HOW TO

BUILD A PC

Building a PC is a huge part of the joy of PC gaming. We take you through the entire process step-by-step.

By James Davenport



1 PREPARE THE CHASSIS

→ Let's build. First, take off both side panels on the case. You'll need access to both sides for inserting hardware, cable management, and general ease of access. It can get crowded, quick.

→ Move any cables inside of the case out of the way. We'll get to those soon enough.

2 MOTHERBOARD PREP

→ Your chassis should include motherboard standoff screws, as pictured (sometimes they're gold instead of black). These prevent your motherboard from making direct contact with the back of the chassis, which could short out the board. Reference the holes on your motherboard to see where the standoffs need to be, since this can vary from model to model. Screw them in tightly.

→ Take the I/O (input/output) shield and line it up with the frame from inside the case. This thin plate keeps out dust and ensures you have more control over air circulation. Make sure you have it facing the right direction before you pop it in. Again, check your motherboard for reference. Push in, making sure to not press too hard on the centre (but you might have to really press hard on those edges). There should be a satisfying click from each side letting you know the shield is firmly in place.





3 INSERT THE MOTHERBOARD

→ Once the chassis is prepped, it's time to insert the motherboard. This chassis has a convenient built-in standoff that centres the motherboard for you. Not all cases will have one, so when you place it down – gently – there may be some resistance up against the I/O shield. This is normal. Just make sure no metal prongs accidentally get lodged into a USB port. Once the motherboard is aligned with the standoffs, screw down the centre – don't tighten yet – and then do the opposite corners. Screwing in opposite corners is a good rule of thumb for installing anything in a PC, as it lowers the risk of misaligning and potentially damaging your hardware. Tighten the screws bit by bit until the motherboard is firmly in place, but don't overdo it. As long as it isn't jostling around, it should be secure.



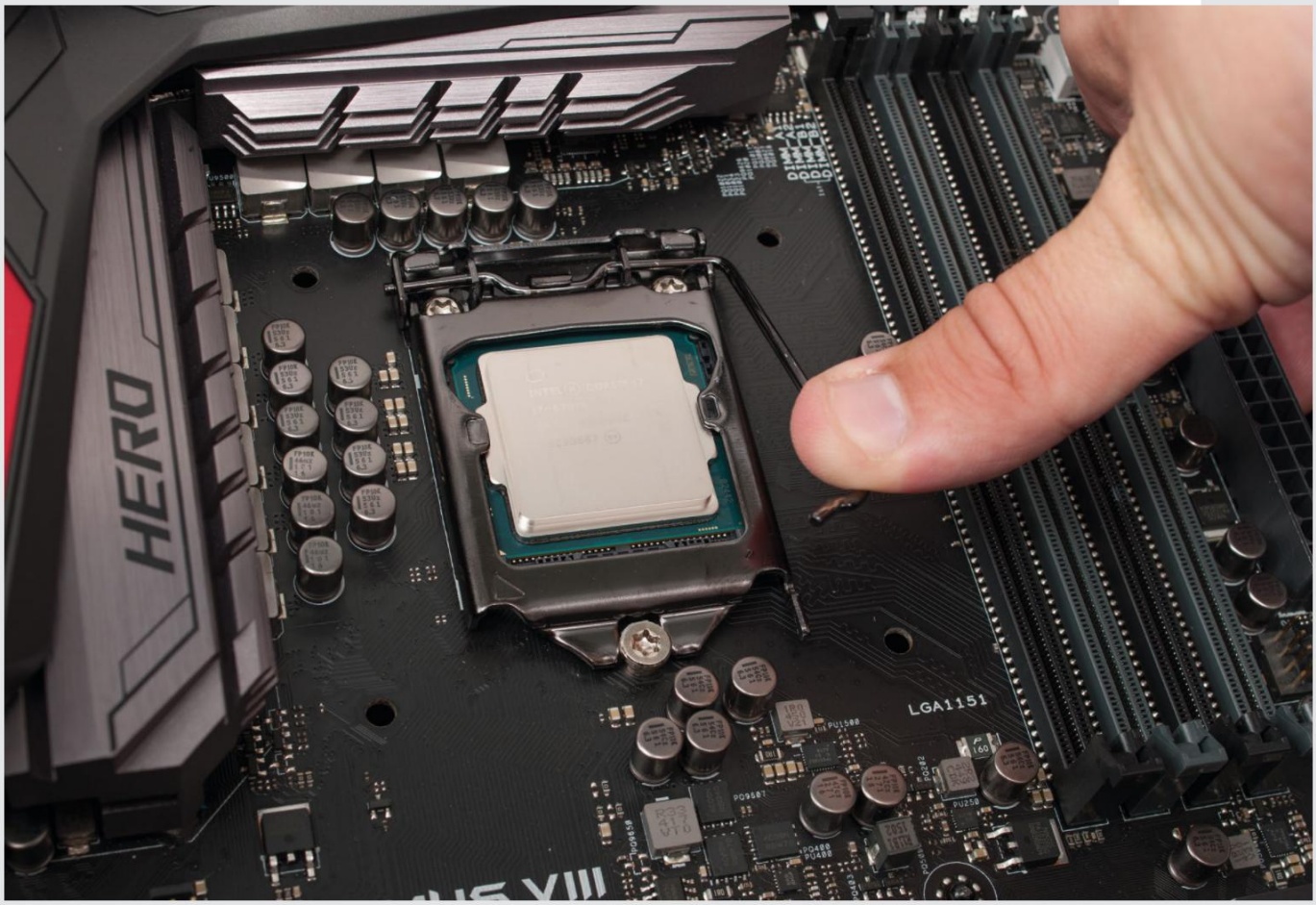
4 SEAT THE PROCESSOR

→ Good job. If you're reading this and not cursing or crying, you've got a motherboard in a PC case. Next up we deal with the most important part of any PC: the CPU. Treat the CPU like an inexplicably living brain in a glass jar. Hold it at the edges and avoid touching the underside. Finger grease can mess with the heat diffusion, which is not good on one of the most expensive, vital, volatile PC components. To install it, lift the lever on the CPU socket on the motherboard, remove the plastic placeholder, and locate the golden arrow on your CPU. This, and the notches on your CPU, will let you know how to align the CPU above the slot. Make sure everything is matched up, then carefully lower the CPU straight down onto the socket. It should fit in effortlessly, so don't put any extraneous pressure on it. CPUs are easily damaged.

→ Once the CPU is in place (check again, scrub), lower the socket shield and secure it by pulling and locking the metal lever down. You'll feel plenty of resistance, and likely a few heart palpitations, but try not to worry too much, everything is (probably) okay.







5 PUT IN THE POWER SUPPLY

→ First, take a breath. The CPU is in. Congrats. Now, for something much simpler... A PC isn't powered entirely by magic, so a power supply (PSU) will be necessary. Ours is a completely modular unit, meaning we can plug and pull cables as needed. Some PSUs have cables built into the unit, making cable management a hassle, so if you can, go modular. Installing is simple. Just make sure the PSU fan is either facing the chassis vent (or upwards if it works in with your airflow scheme) and then screw it in from the outside of the case.

6 READY THE RAM

→ With the PSU in, its time for another simple step: the memory. First, you'll need to locate the DIMM slots. Any DIMM-wit could do it! Sorry, that wasn't helpful. They're the four, thin, RAM-length slots next to the CPU. In order to take advantage of any dual-channel functionality, you'll need to install the RAM in alternating slots. Refer to your motherboard documents for details, but for us, the slots were labelled.

→ Placing the RAM is simple. Make sure the locks at the end of each slot are open, find the notch in your RAM, line it up with the notch in the slot, insert it, and push until the lock clicks and the RAM is securely in place. Don't be afraid to push down hard.



7 INSTALL THE COOLER

→ Heat sucks, especially for CPUs, which is why installing a cooler is vital, especially if you plan to overclock. Now, this step will vary depending on what type of cooler is being installed, so be sure to refer to the manufacturer's instructions for the intricacies of installation. If you're using a stock Intel cooler, installation is as simple as lining up the small fan and pressing down each corner until the legs snap into the motherboard. We'll be installing a closed-loop liquid cooler on our build pictured here.

→ Most coolers require some kind of backplate installation, which means you'll be coming from the underside of your motherboard. For ours, we just placed the backplate into the corresponding holes on the motherboard surrounding the CPU and stuck it there with a foam adhesive that came with the cooler. With an air cooler, you'll probably thread mounting screws through the top of the motherboard and attach them to the backplate with nuts. On the top side, directly over the CPU, goes the cooler itself. Make sure you align each corner around the CPU before you then screw it into place.

→ Throughout the inside of the chassis, there are vents and corresponding holes for fan placement. With our liquid cooler, the radiator, a square metallic mesh used for heat diffusion, attaches to an intake fan on the inside of the case. The inside of every case will have designated areas for fans, so find one that fits a radiator, a fan, and doesn't force the tubes into an awkward position. From there, you just screw it in.

→ Finally, plug the cooler's power cable into the motherboard. Again, the motherboard manual should illustrate where the pins are in case they're not labelled on the motherboard itself. For our liquid cooler, we plugged into CPU_FAN and W_PUMP.





8 INSTALL SSD (AND/OR HDD)

Of course, every PC needs non-volatile memory for storage, but nowadays, there's an allowance for plenty of variation. What you see on these pages is a simple build, so we're just sticking with a single SSD, but there's nothing to prevent you from using an HDD or combo of the two.



Installing an SSD is easy in this Fractal Design Define R5 case. You'll find that most cases are built with SSDs in mind these days: just screw the drive into one of the provided SSD trays, and then screw the SSD plus tray into wherever the chassis allows. Now is a good time to start thinking about cable management, too.

The drive will need power and a way to interface with the other PC components, so it's cable time. First, you'll need to plug the SATA data and power cables into the base of the drive.

Be sure to arrange your cables with some kind of logic in mind that prevents them from trailing across the motherboard, if possible. Most cases let you snake cables through the base behind the mobo by using conveniently placed routing holes, but not all chassis are so lucky.



Next, the SATA data cable plugs into the motherboard. Some plugs have different speeds or interfaces, so check your motherboard manual for specifics about which to use. Lastly, the power cable goes to the PSU as indicated on the PSU itself or in the product manual.

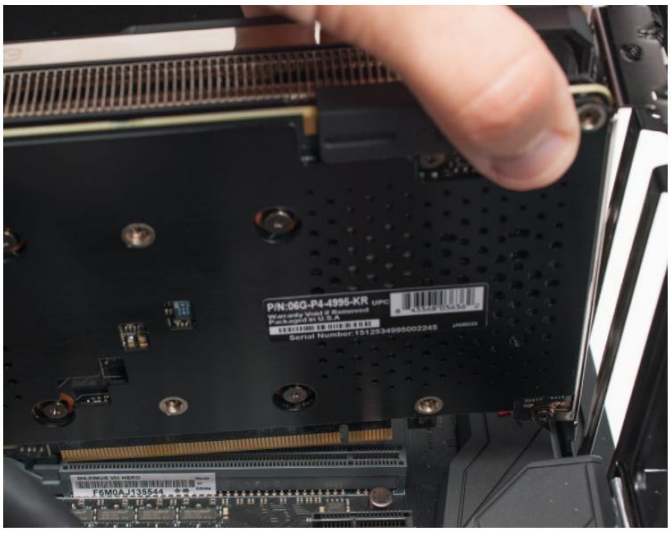


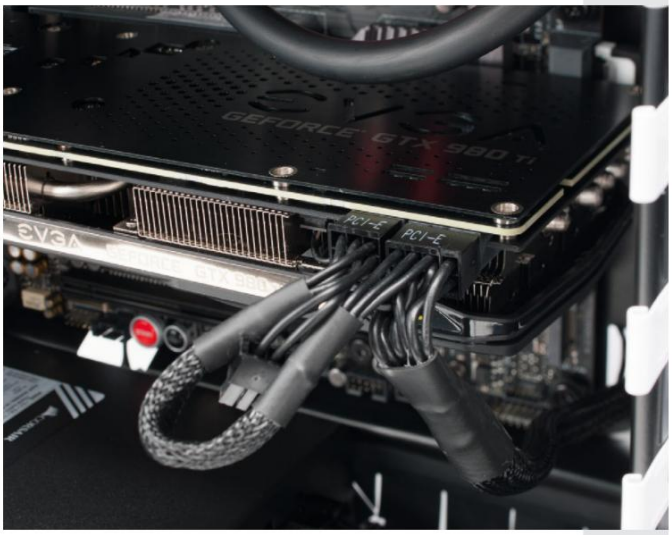
9 INSTALL THE GPU

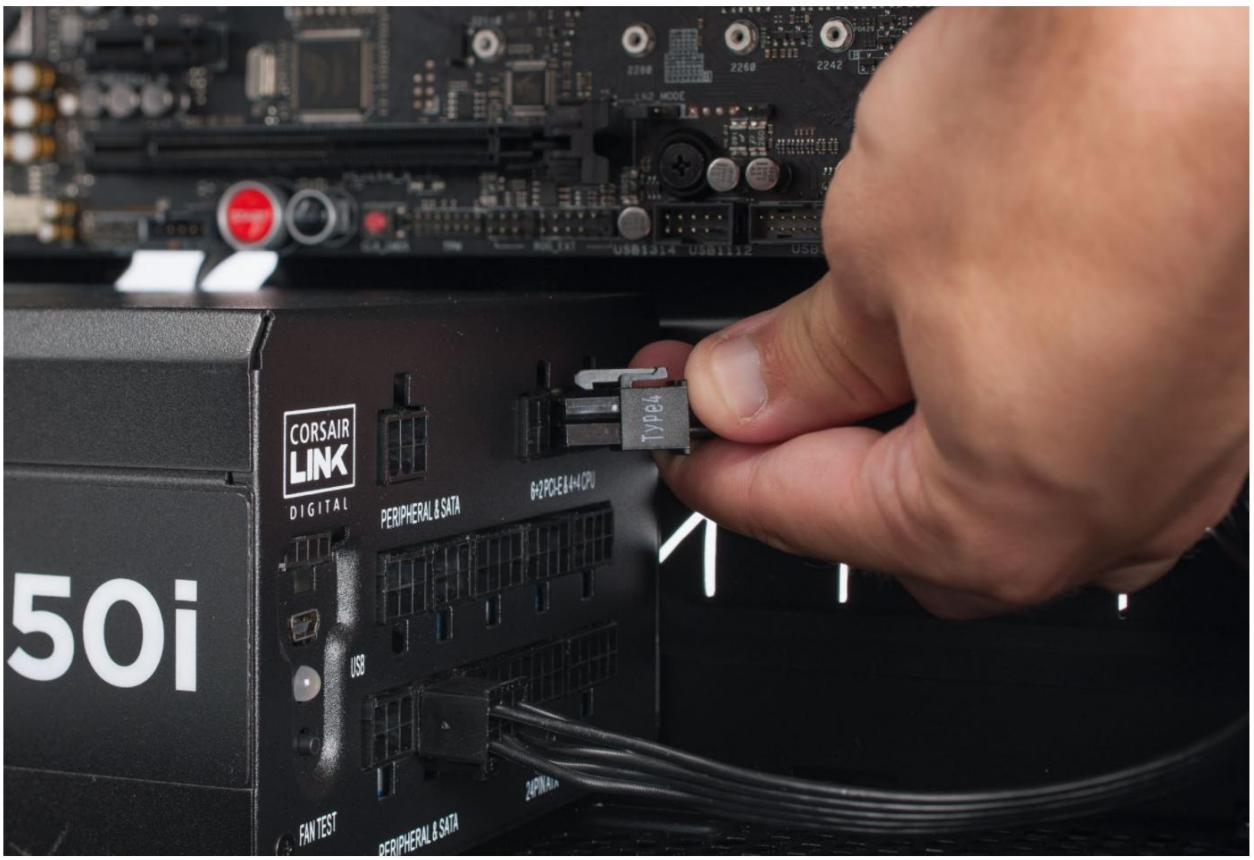
→ It's time to seriously pump this PC up with everyone's favourite component: the graphics card. Fortunately, installing this in your PC is extremely simple. First, remove the PCI-E slot shields near the rear of the case where your video card will lay. You'll find that most of today's graphics cards take up two slots.

→ Grab your graphics card, align it with the PCI-E slot, and press it down gently until you feel the card lock into place. Secure the graphics card by screwing it in with thumbscrews where the slot shields used to be.

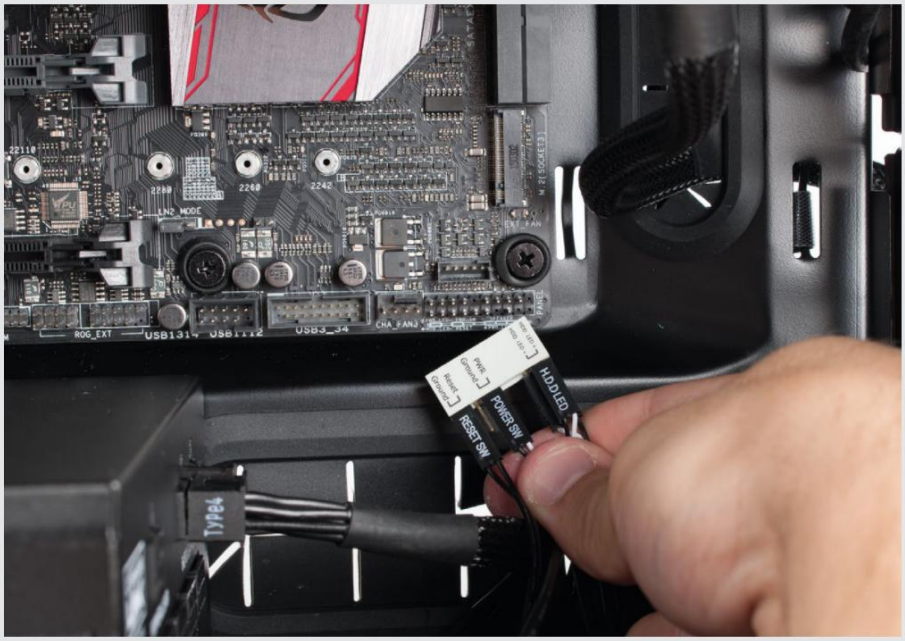
→ GPUs need extra power to function, so find the power cables your GPU requires and plug them in (they're typically labelled PCI-E or VGA). Don't worry since PSU cables only fit where they're meant to, thanks to an elaborate set of square and hexagonal plug components. If your PSU is modular, make sure the cables are plugged into the unit as well.



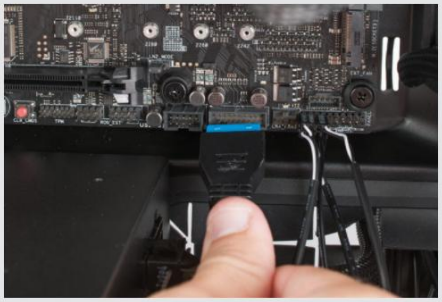




10 PANEL CONNECTORS



We're in the final stretch! Beware fat-fingered folks: this step isn't exactly the best. In order to get the lights and switches on the front of your chassis to work, these tiny cables need to plug into your motherboard in very specific places. Sometimes motherboards will come with an extra bit that you can plug the front panel connectors into before the motherboard, but that isn't always the case, so refer to the motherboard manual and on-board labelling if necessary. There may be some front panel USB cables too – the pictured cable with the thin blue head – but those are much easier to deal with. Plug them in as indicated.





A motherboard needs power too. Find the 24-pin power connector, orient it correctly, and push it into the motherboard until it's firmly connected. Standard ATX motherboards also require an additional power connection close to the CPU, usually four to six pins. Check for one, plug it in, and then make sure all power cables plug back into the PSU if it's modular.



In order for your PC to stay cool, you'll need to plug in the fans. There should be fan connectors in various locations on the motherboard. Find the ones that best suit your cable management and plug them in.

Wrap things up by doing any last minute cable management. It's not a bad idea to double check your connections and make sure all of your components are firmly seated, too. Throw on the panels when you're done. Now for the moment of truth. Plug your beautiful creation in and press the power button.




MAXIMUS VIII
HERO
CORSAIR
MAXIMUS VIII
HERO
EVGA GEFORCE GTX 980 Ti
CORSAIR
RM850i



11 AND THEN, A PC!

→Be sure to take a step back and drink it all in. You've (probably) successfully expressed yourself via expensive hardware, sweat, tears and a healthy dose of love. This is the beginning of a new era in anti-aliasing and post-processing for you, but it doesn't have to end here. Feel free to add components we didn't cover. If you're a fan of antiquated tech, then throw in a disc drive. Want to open up your PC to more peripherals? Add a bluetooth receiver. Not enough red LEDs in your life? Well, then light that sucker up. The platform is open for a reason.

Troubleshooting

→Woe, destruction, ruin, and decay! Your PC won't turn on, maybe it's beeping, or – mercy me – it's crashing unexpectedly. Don't fret. Much. A PC should be able to turn on and reach the BIOS screen with only the CPU, RAM and GPU plugged into the motherboard. If you don't see the BIOS screen after powering up, then run through the following troubleshooting steps to sort out the problem.

→When you're digging around in your PC's guts, make sure it's powered off and unplugged from the wall.

→Make sure your PC is actually getting power. Most PSUs have a switch that, well, needs to be flipped on first. If you're plugged into a power strip, as you should be, make sure that it's turned on too.

→Still no power? Reseat the connections between the power supply and the motherboard. Make sure you didn't miss anything. Even building veterans make mistakes.

→If the power button is still doing nada, check the front panel cables on the motherboard. Those tiny things are very easy to mix around by accident. Make sure they're where they need to be.

→Okay, now you're getting power, but not seeing anything or hearing a series of beeps when trying to boot. Make sure the RAM is seated properly. Take it out, put it back in, maybe try the other set of DIMM slots.

→Check your video cable – it should be connected to the GPU, not the motherboard. Reseat the GPU and check all its power connections.

→Reset the BIOS by pulling out the CMOS battery – it's the circular battery on the motherboard. Taking this out essentially resets the motherboard memory.

→Are all your fans plugged in and spinning? Is the cooler doing its job? Check their connections. It could be they're not doing their job and the CPU is overheating.

→Remove and reseat the CPU and cooler, making sure it's properly aligned in the slot.

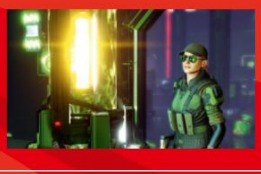
→Finally, reseat the motherboard. Maybe it isn't mounted correctly and it's shorting out. Basically, rebuild the thing. Sorry bucko, you signed up for this.

→Throw it in the trash. It will turn to ash and come back as a mythical overclocked bird that can run *Crysis*.

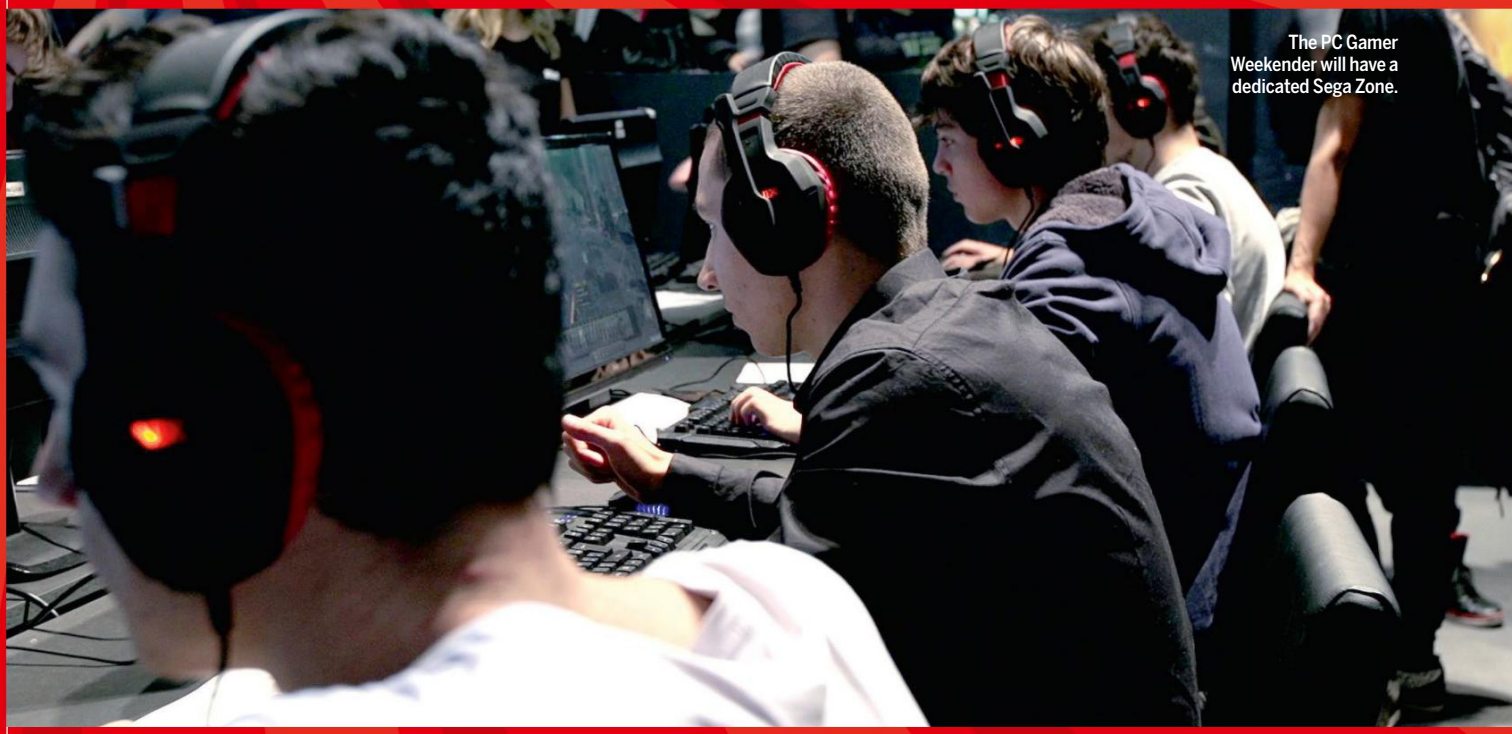
→If none of that works, it might be a good time to look at the warranties and return policies your components have. Most manufacturers have solid support options, so even if you've been dealt a bunk chunk, there's probably an option for easy replacement. The only price you'll have to pay is time. We all die some day. Time.

THE PC GAMER Weekender 2016








The PC Gamer Weekender will have a dedicated Sega Zone.





A new PC gaming event created *just for you*

Join us at the **PC GAMER WEEKENDER** at The Old Truman Brewery in London, on March 5-6, 2016

A little while ago we surveyed hundreds of you about the PC gaming event you'd like to see in the UK. This March, we're turning that feedback into an event we think you'll love – The PC Gamer Weekender, at The Old Truman Brewery in London. We're building a definitive PC gaming event: everything from the chance to go hands-on with some of the latest games, to hardware workshops and live stage events.

For starters, we're hosting playable versions of both *Total War: Warhammer* and *Dark Souls III*, along with on-stage events with developers such as Firaxis and The Creative Assembly. There's a dedicated gaming area to give you time with your most wanted games, designed to keep queuing down to a minimum.

You'll also be able to build a PC from scratch, participate in videogame tournaments and much more. You'll be able to meet PC Gamer readers and even interact with the writers. What an honour!

→ *Book your ticket now at* ***www.pcgamer.com/weekender***

PC GAMER

SEND

A free copy of *The Talos Principle* and its DLC for this month's star letter

Better to pander

Is it more important for a developer to stick with their initial vision, or to listen to the loudest part of their community after release? Granted, many a lazy developer has dumped the duty of beta-testing on the pre-ordering, paying, customer, only to abandon the game a patch or two down the road. But it also seems the more willing a developer is to engage the community and continue to support the game, the more incessant the entirely game-altering requests are. Is it better to pander to the biggest audience, or to deliver a unique experience and stick to their vision? ■
Nicholas Schlitt

It's a bit of both: community feedback is important, but it shouldn't come at the expense of the developer's vision. Fortunately, most developers have a selection of analytics and tracking tools, enabling them learn and respond to their community's actions – not just their words. PCG

Over to you

I've been a huge fan of PC Gamer ever since Computer Gaming World shut down and my subscription got kicked over to you, which is how you got lucky enough to get the following question. Now that Steam has sortable user reviews that let me find the best games, why should I renew my subscription next time around? It would spare me from The Spy's inane gibberish each month, and the money I saved could be put towards additional games. ■
Troy Williams

Steam user reviews are useful, but do they detail their attempts to recreate The Martian in *Take On Mars*, or recount the time they drowned in *GTA 5*? Put simply, we're not *just* about reviews and inane gibberish. PCG



Fallout 3 did something

I've got a bone to pick with the writer of your *Fallout 3* Reinstall. In his article, he wrote that *Fallout New Vegas* was in many ways a superior game. I couldn't disagree more. It may be true that *New Vegas* is more streamlined and more polished, but *Fallout 3* did something that I've never experienced before in a videogame. It had so many elements working in tandem to create a rich, atmospheric world that made you care about it. The quiet gloom of a burnt-out suburb, telling the tale of the shattered American dream. *Fallout 3* paints a vivid picture of the horror of post-apocalyptic USA, and adds just the right touch of black, cynical humour to turn it into a masterpiece. When I played *New Vegas*, I couldn't have been more disappointed. It had more bells and whistles, but none of that same rich atmosphere.
Dylan Bremner

Well argued, Dylan. Although, judging by the internet's reaction to *Fallout 4*, it seems that *New Vegas* still has plenty of fans. PCG

I'm going to pass

As a huge Star Wars fan, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm going to pass on buying *Star Wars Battlefront*. I was so excited when the game was announced, especially since I'm also a big *Battlefield* player. To have DICE build my dream game seemed too good to be true. Apparently it was, because from what I can see they've stripped so much content, even compared to past *Battlefront* titles, that all you're really getting is a very pretty sandbox of Star Wars assets with no depth. It just feels like they pulled gameplay out to either sell to us later as DLC, or to put back in later for the sequel. I just don't feel right rewarding EA and DICE for giving us such a shallow game. ■
Mark Scheierman

It's a shame, isn't it? One thing, though: while *Battlefront* will have DLC, it probably won't add in everything that we'd want. Its streamlining seems to be an attempt at widespread accessibility. The downside is a shooter without any real depth, as Andy notes in our review. PCG

USER REVIEWS

■ Playing *Fallout 4* to death. Definitely my game of the year. It's flaws are just a byproduct of its depth and complexity.
Simon
It's going to be a pretty one-sided user review section this month, isn't it?

■ *Fallout 4*, because I deserve to be happy. Also *Dota 2*, because I can't be too happy.
Sam Hopkins
Regulating your emotions through gaming is fine, Sam.

■ *Fallout 4* for 105 hours. Also *Dota 2* and *Binding of Isaac Afterbirth*, because I like being abused for some reason.
Andrew Preble
It's amazing you found enough time between playing those three to be able to tweet this.

■ I have been playing *Downwell* and i like how satisfying it is even for a 4-5 minute gaming experience.
Leo Loikkanen
That's a funny way of spelling *Fallout 4*.

■ I'm warming up with *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* only to be hit by the news of *Mankind Divided* being delayed. No regrets!
Magued Ghoraba
On the bright side, the delay means you'll have enough time to squeeze in a couple more replays.

■ *Fallout 3*, because I don't have *Fallout 4* and didn't want to be left out.
Sarah Wieringa

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ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON IS BACK!

Next-gen features like the fluid track editor and Steam Workshop support should make this the best **RCT** ever.

It's been far too long since we've accidentally sent theme park guests flying to their fiery deaths on a half-built roller coaster, or exploited their need for hydration to make a cheap buck at the concession stand. But our beloved RollerCoaster Tycoon is back, with its newest entry: RollerCoaster Tycoon World!

The 3D world looks beautiful, the track editor looks insanely fun to play with, and the hefty heap of stats and simulation going on behind-the-scenes with park guests adds a lot of depth to the game. The dev team actually teamed up with Six Flags to analyze walking routes, park design, and the intricacies of what makes a roller coaster awesome.

Park attendees (peeps) have individual likes and dislikes and will search out what they're craving and cringe at visual themes if you're just cobbling together random ideas. It all sounds a bit like the sort of management and AI tinkering that we love and should help us expand beyond our usual plan of combining cheap popcorn with expensive soda into more traumatizing—I mean, exciting?—scenarios for the peeps.

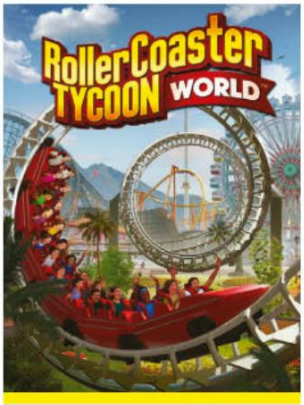
Peeps have individual likes and dislikes and will search out what they're craving

The series is fully embracing the internet as well, with awesome sharing tools, user-generated content, and Steam Workshop support providing tons of room for creative players to show off their stuff.

We're so happy to see RollerCoaster Tycoon making a comeback, and this looks like the best one yet!



RollerCoaster Tycoon.com



3 PIECES OF TECH IN RCTW WE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WE NEEDED

These evolutions to RollerCoaster Tycoon are absolutely brilliant, and now we can't live without them!

1. POWERFUL 3D BUILDING TOOLS

You will love the complete freedom of designing your own theme park in a grid-less, 3D world. Freeform object placement gives meticulous designers the opportunity to drop every single in-game object anywhere they choose. You can lay out curved paths, alter the landscape with powerful terraforming capabilities, or use the new 3D track editor to engineer the most insane, face-melting rides you can possibly imagine!

2. EXTENSIVE CUSTOMIZATION

The ability to create custom content for import into the game? Check. Full mod support and sharing through Steam Workshop? Check. A freeform camera to view my park from every conceivable angle? Check.

3. NEXT-GEN SIMULATION

This is classic RCT gameplay, made even better by today's technology, like the new advanced physics engine and the return of Coaster Cam. Management tools are deeper and more robust, allowing you to dig into the day-to-day operations like never before - from managing on-site medical facilities or booking live entertainment to organizing custodial services and hiring mechanics. The improved peep AI will even drop notes in the suggestion box for you. Disregard them at your own peril.





PC GAMER

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

Wherever possible, we finish a game before finalising the review. We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions.

ALPHAS & BETAS

This means we'll review any released alpha, beta or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently buy. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time in their current state.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be hours-long new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. Either way, if we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-10% A game of absolutely no value. Are you playing one of these games? Take 3d6 emotional damage.
Examples *Big Brother*

11%-39% Yikes. Technically broken, or so fundamentally flawed that it's ultimately not worth any time or money. Bad.
Examples *The War Z*

40%-49% This game is functional, but majorly flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Firefall, Star Trek, Armikrog*

50%-59% Mediocre. If it has any interesting ideas, they don't work well. Might suffer from bugs or technical issues.
Examples *Primordia, Painkiller: Hell & Damnation*

60%-69% An interesting idea poorly expressed, or a derivative idea executed averagely. Comes with caveats.
Examples *SimCity, Mortal Kombat X, Blood Bowl 2*

70%-79% Good, but not a classic. This score is a recommendation, just not a glowing one.
Examples *Broken Age, Batman: Arkham Knight*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance.
Examples *Elite: Dangerous, Soma*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Ahead of its time and important to PC gaming.
Examples *MGS V, GTA V, Undertale*

95%-98% This is far and away one of the best games we've ever played, and we recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program, Spelunky*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Life-changing. A masterpiece and more. Actively boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Apocalypse now and then

Bethesda does it again. *Fallout 4* is a huge, satisfying chunk of light-hearted, entertaining RPG adventure. It's a lot like *Fallout 3*, in fact. Or *Skyrim*. Or... well, you get the idea. Bethesda works from a set, confident template, and from that creates a world that's full of distinct, enjoyable encounters. It can be jarring, at first, to be in a space that feels so familiar. It isn't long before the similarities fall away, and you're left with a brilliantly conceived world that's begging to be explored. Plus, it's one of the best shooters you'll play this year.

Bethesda's isn't the only game worth your attention this month. *StarCraft II*, *Vemintide* and *Galak-Z* all earn the coveted Editor's Choice award. *Star Wars Battlefront* and *Just Cause 3*, unfortunately, not so much.

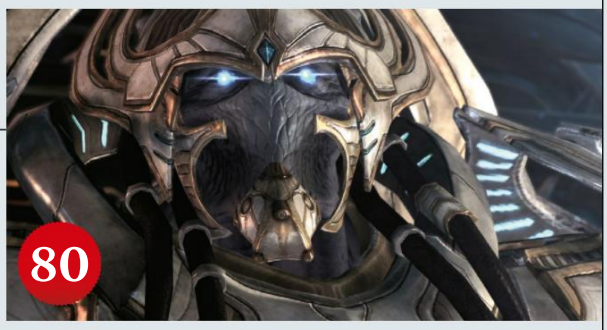
Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE
DEPUTY EDITOR
phil.savage@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK
Get in touch via our 'Network' section on page 59, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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80



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This month's vault dwellers...



PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
RPG, radiation
Currently playing
Fallout 4
This month
Spent hours in a grim wasteland. Then returned from London to review *Fallout 4*.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Action, Star Wars
Currently playing
Star Wars Battlefront
This month
Petitioned for a Return of the Jedi recut that replaces the Emperor with Guy Fieri.



IAN BIRMBAUM
Specialist in
FPS, ratmen
Currently playing
Call of Duty: Black Ops III
This month
Reviewed all the gun games. Well, he does live in Texas.



CHRIS THURSTEN
Specialist in
Esports, lasers
Currently playing
StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void
This month
Didn't replicate sOs's *StarCraft II* success, despite all the lasers.



DANIELLA LUCAS
Specialist in
JRPG, MMO
Currently playing
Tales of Zestiria
This month
Was asked to pick between *Final Fantasy IX* and *Final Fantasy XII*. Couldn't.



ANGUS MORRISON
Specialist in
Strategy, quinoa
Currently playing
Anno 2205
This month
Instantly regretted building a middle-class utopia.



JON BLYTH
Specialist in
Retro, Death
Currently playing
Darksiders II
This month
Somehow didn't balk at the word-crime 'Deathinitive', despite it being awful.



"A WORLD THAT FEELS COHESIVE AND FULL OF PERVERSE CHARM"

BIG BOSTON

FALLOUT 4 is bigger, better and more of the same.

By Phil Savage

Let me tell you about my Vault Dweller. She's a master of stealth in flame-red power armour. Protected by her hulking exoskeleton, she stomps quietly through buildings – efficiently dispatching her enemies with a with a sword or silenced pistol. Sometimes, the dozen or so raiders she's hunting will realise that something's amiss. They'll search the area, making threats about what they'll do should they find the lumbering behemoth crouched unseen in the corner. Occasionally she'll watch as they fail to notice how there's a mass of metal armour with a hot-rod paint job right in front of their faces. Then she'll murder them with a single bullet to the head.

For me, this has been *Fallout 4*. It's a highly customisable RPG in a world packed with things to do. Its component parts are intricate, and invite you to tailor them to your liking. When you do, it can be wonderfully satisfying, but also – in the sense that you can be a huge stealth machine carrying an antique, irradiated sword – a little bit dumb. *Fallout 4* wilfully trades immersion for an enjoyable, freeform sandbox of possibilities. Whether you'll enjoy it or not, I think, depends on your reaction to that opening paragraph. Does it sound like an infuriating, dissonant mess, or the cool, emergent intersection of player-driven decisions? I'm in the latter camp.

If you've played a Bethesda RPG before, this will be nothing new. *Fallout*'s catchphrase, "war never changes," has never felt more appropriate. As *Fallout 3* was to *Oblivion*, so *Fallout 4* is to *Skyrim* – the post-apocalypse of a futuristic Earth trapped in a '50s aesthetic, now available in Bethesda's Creation Engine and boasting some interesting new features. But for all the improvements, the moment-to-moment experience is broadly the same. Journeying to one of the many undiscovered locations in your vicinity, you'll kill enemies, pick locks, hack terminals, collect loot and experience a standalone vignette that weaves into the larger story of Boston after the bombs.

Fallout 4's main story is the best Bethesda has created

Fallout 4 is set in a condensed version of Massachusetts, known as the Commonwealth. Its map incorporates much of the state's east coast, from Salem to Boston – squished down like a *Euro Truck Simulator 2* version of the end of the world. It opens on the day of the apocalypse, giving you the brief chance to experience life in the pastel-painted sanctuary of Sanctuary before it gets reduced to rubble. This taste of the pre-apocalypse isn't all that revelatory. Unsurprisingly, the world was nicer when there weren't any mutated dogs trying to eat your face. But it does seem to reflect a desire on Bethesda's part to make a more memorable main campaign.

In fact, this is the best main story Bethesda has created. That's not a high bar to clear, but, for once, embarking on a main quest doesn't feel like a distraction. Your character leaves their Vault 200 years after the apocalypse, in search of her (or his) kidnapped son. It's a simple, primal motivation, but effective in leading you on a journey to the Commonwealth's main source of conflict: the appearance and distrust of human-like synths, and their connection to the mysterious Institute. The story succeeds because it ties in more closely to the side-plots Bethesda has always been better at creating. The factions and companions you meet along the way are crucial to the overall plot. I had a lot of fun playing the factions off against each other, leading them inexorably to a dramatic finale.

Then, it ends. As world-shifting as the events you enact are, they're dampened by the abruptness of the conclusion. I should have expected this, of course – I played *Skyrim* – and perhaps it shows how much I was enjoying those final missions that their resolution left me feeling flat.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A post-apocalyptic sandbox RPG.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 970, Intel i5-3570K, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.fallout4.com

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

DOGGY STYLE

Your canine pal is picky about his threads

LOVES

1. Collar
2. Dog armour
3. Bandana
4. Goggles



HATES

1. Mascot head
2. Corset
3. Sea captain's hat

COAST APOCALYPSE

Once again, then, the campaign is just the throughline for the many, many sidequests, miscellaneous events and unprompted acts of exploration you complete along the way. Bethesda's *Fallout* games are primarily about the atmosphere of the world at large, and *Fallout 4* is no different. It's brutal and harrowing, but only up to a point. There's a lightheartedness that chips away at the tone, softening the death and decay. *Fallout 4*, like its predecessors, isn't a survival game – even though, initially at least, resources can be hard to come by.

Graphically, *Fallout 4* looks like an improved version of *Skyrim*. Which is to say that it looks like an improved version of *Fallout 3*. That's mostly down to the tech powering it – even »

some of the NPC animations will be recognisable to anyone who's spent enough time in Tamriel. The faces are better, but still not perfect. The voice acting is much better, but still not perfect. Initially, I experienced the mild disappointment of familiarity. Four years after *Skyrim*, I was hoping for a more pronounced improvement. Now I wonder if I couldn't see the forest for the low resolution tree textures. The age and limitations of Bethesda's engine are well apparent, but the Commonwealth is enticing. On the macro level, *Fallout 4*'s scale and detail creates a world that feels cohesive and full of perverse charm.

Boston is a great setting. It's denser than the Capital Wasteland of *Fallout 3*, and more colourful. There's still a lot of grey and brown, sure, but also reds, blues and deadly, glowing greens. The locations, and the people who live in them, imbue the world with character. Diamond City, one of the main locales, is a town built in Boston's Fen stadium. As a collection of shacks and huts, it feels similar to Megaton – but more interesting, and more appropriate to the setting. Like *New Vegas* before it, *Fallout 4* isn't about a post-apocalypse, but rather a post-apocalypse in a specific, recognisable place.

Elsewhere, there's the Glowing Sea – a murky, barren expanse that still manages to be one of the most atmospheric places I've been to this year. A huge part of *Fallout 4*'s appeal is the sense of discovery and mystery. Each location feels crafted, and that gives a powerful reason to investigate. Maybe you'll find text logs that detail a conflict between rival gang leaders, or just a note explaining how to access a hidden stash of loot. The world feels lived-in and dangerous, and it's fun to pick apart its history.

LOW VAULTAGE

That said, I do wish it was a bit stranger – or even more playful. I'm in dangerous territory here, because there are so many sidequests that I haven't found or finished. For all I know, there are plenty of weird and unexpected encounters to discover. But I've yet to find anything outside of the main quest that's as odd as *Fallout 3*'s Vault full of Gary clones, or as dramatic as the decision to let a group of ghouls murder an apartment block full of rich jerks. I love the idea of the Vaults as weird social experiments, but of the three I've visited – my own character's included – none have delivered a compelling hook. One had a great idea behind it, but the delivery was underwhelming.

The dog doesn't judge me when I steal all the telephones from a house

In general, there seems less scope to be a pantomime villain in this world. I think part of the reason for this is that my character feels like a more fully formed person this time around. It helps that she's fully voice acted – every decision picked from the conversation wheel results in a sentence or two of spoken dialogue. There's still plenty of scope for imprinting your own whims onto your Vault Dweller's personality, but it happens in a more strictly defined way. My character just didn't seem the type to nuke a whole town full of people for a handful of bottle-tops. She's nice like that.

I wish the conversation interface was better. The dialogue wheel provides a *Mass Effect*-style approximation of your reply, but it's inconsistent. A given set of options might contain a mixture of statements for your character to say, or tones or stances for them to take.

Having a voiced protagonist does, at least, give me a greater sense of attachment to the world – particularly to my companions. This is the first Bethesda RPG where I've consistently had an NPC along for the ride. For once, they're much more than a mule to carry excess weapons. My second favourite companion, Nick Valentine, is an old school private eye – complete with trenchcoat and fedora. He inserts himself into conversations, and will stop and chat to other NPCs that he's previously helped. It's nice to get a sense, however small, that the world doesn't just exist for the Vault Dweller to be in it.

My *favourite* companion is the dog, because it doesn't judge me when I steal all the telephones from a house. I have a lot of telephones in my pockets, as well as microscopes, alarm clocks and dinner trays. This is why I took to wearing power armour – so I could carry all the crap that I was collecting on my travels. If you love obsessively liberating a place of all its items, then good news: everything you can pick up in *Fallout 4* is useful. That's because of the new settlement system.

FROM THE ASHES

Settlements are *Fallout 4*'s major new feature – like *Skyrim*'s *Hearthfire* DLC, but massively expanded. Gain ownership of a settlement and you can construct new items, from water pumps and gun turrets to whole prefabricated structures. Each has a resource cost associated with it. A wall panel simply requires wood and steel, but something like a defensive turret is more complex – the more deadly ones need aluminium, circuitry, gears, fiber optics, and a

TOURIST BOARD *Places to visit in the Commonwealth*



1 SANCTUARY
Decrepit shithole or new home? Both, actually.



2 SALEM
No witches to be found. Plenty of bloatflies, though.





3 DIAMOND CITY
The former Fen Stadium, in the heart of Boston.



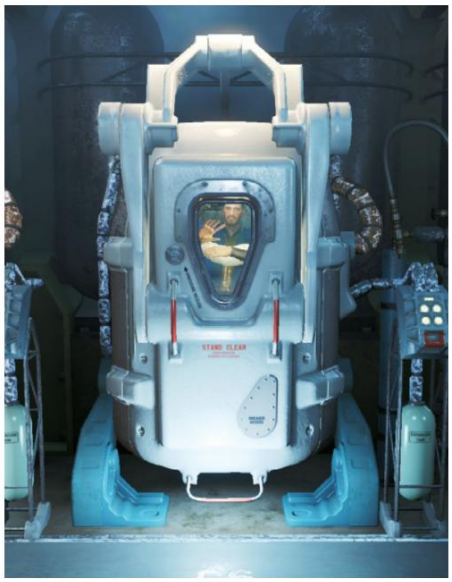
4 THE GLOWING SEA
What's here? I don't want to spoil the surprise.


Now we find out if Bert the Turtle was full of shit.


It's the 23rd century, and we still crank our laser-muskets?
RAIDER
001
004
HP


"Counter offer: pick your own damn melons."

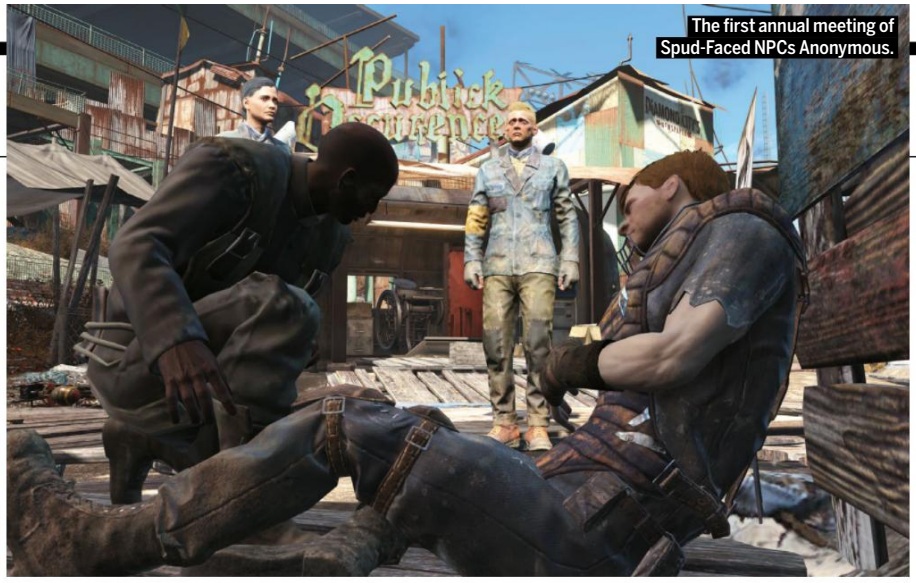





VATS isn't essential, but can get you out of a tight spot.
RAIDER
21
32
TORSO
39
32
36
26
CRIT
010
036
HP
[Q) SELECT E) ACCEPT Tab) RETURN W,S) BODY PART A,D) CYCLE TARGET]
AP







The first annual meeting of Spud-Faced NPCs Anonymous.



Plasma weapons turn monsters into lootable goop.







Bloody messes aren't exclusive to the Bloody Mess perk.


When the world is this irradiated one extra mini-nuke won't hurt.


I should have brought a mop. Or several hundred.

generator for power. Open the crafting workshop in a settlement, and a green outline will show the area you're allowed to build in. Within this space, you can also scrap items for resources. That's fine for turning trees, cars and loose tires into wood, steel or rubber, but rarer resources must be found or purchased out in the world.

And so you collect junk. Every item in the game is made out of resources. Dump them into a settlement's workshop, and they can be turned into something useful. A typewriter becomes a useful source of gears, screws and springs – handy for building machinery that can defend your settlement from raiders.

It's gratifying to watch an area turn from a run-down ghost town into a functioning settlement. Nevertheless, the workshop interface is a bit fiddly to use. Buildings are organised into categories, and it's a pain having to switch back and forth trying to remember if the radio beacon that attracts new settlers was in 'Power > Miscellaneous' or 'Resources > Miscellaneous'. Worse still, your workshop's resource pool isn't global, but tied to each specific settlement. You might have enough oil to worry a flock of seagulls, but you can't build a generator in Tenpines Bluff if you left it all in Sanctuary Hills. At one point, I had to fast-travel between multiple different settlements just to rediscover where I'd left the pocket watch that contained the gear I needed to build a water pump. You can build supply lines that share resources between two connected workshops, but it's a clumsy system, and impractical unless you've already put in the work to grow a settlement's population.

You'll acquire a fair few settlements if you do missions for the Minutemen faction – a local militia group that's working to make the Commonwealth safe for decent, hard-working folk. It can become a bit overwhelming. Each settlement needs a number of resources: food, water and beds. The more you have in a settlement, the more defensive structures you'll need to protect it. Occasionally, you'll get alerts to defend these places. A few of my settlements were wiped out, either because I was too busy having fun adventures against super-mutants or just didn't see the mission prompt that alerted me to their danger.

FEELING PERKY *The best perks, no matter the build*



SCROUNGER
You'll always need ammo. This helps you find more of it.

LOCKSMITH
Remember the lockpicking in *Skyrim*? Get ready to do that a hundred more times.

HACKER
Remember *Fallout 3*'s hacking? Get ready to... you get the idea.

GUN NUT
Gain access to new mods, if you can find the materials.

ATTACK DOG
Make a good boy even better by giving him the power to pin enemies.

FULL SCOPE

Guns have a crafting system, too – you can create mods that alter their scopes, barrels, grips and attachments in a variety of ways. This, to me, felt like a much better use for my growing collection of minutiae. Guns are the best thing about *Fallout 4*. Unlike its predecessors, it's an accomplished and enjoyable shooter. While my preference was for silenced weapons, the scarcity of ammo – at least for the first couple of dozen hours – forced me to experiment. I didn't mind. Getting into firefights is a joy, to the point that, by the end, I'd all but entirely abandoned the VATS system.

I have a Tommy gun that fires exploding bullets

Early weapons taken off raiders are relatively weak, but as you journey through the Commonwealth you're guaranteed to find a collection of favourites. Early on, you get a laser musket – a powerful rifle that needs to be cranked between each shot. Using it is tense and frantic, as it requires you to dive into cover to hammer the R key, before popping out and taking your shot. With mods, you can imbue a musket with up to six charges. It's a deadly thing, if you've got the space to fully load it.

The best guns and armour are scavenged off of legendary enemies, identifiable by the star next to their name. When downed, they'll drop a legendary item with a special benefit. I've got a Tommy gun that fires exploding bullets, a dual-barrel shotgun that never needs reloading, a chest piece that turns me invisible when crouched and not moving, and, of course, an irradiated sword. I can't bear to part with any of these things. I'd sooner throw away my precious collection of telephones.



One effect of *Fallout 4*'s immediate familiarity is that I'm more conscious than ever of the flaws of the engine. I haven't experienced many bugs, but there are lots of quirks. AI NPCs, for example, like to run off at inopportune moments in response to some faraway threat that they've decided to deal with. In one instance, a pair did this during a forced scripted sequence – leaving me stranded and unable to move. With so many systems working to create interesting, emergent experiences, sometimes things break down.

As a whole, this is a lovingly made production. It's filled with care and attention to detail – such as the expanded set of radio stations, or the way flash radiation storms bathe the world in a sickly, ominous green hue. It's a pleasure to pick through the world to discover new sights, and to pick through the perks and customisation options to conceive the perfect character build, however bizarre. Many of *Fallout 4*'s problems, as with every Bethesda RPG before it, are a consequence of what makes the game unforgettable. That might not be the neatest conclusion, but it explains why, 50 hours in, I'm still having fun in *Fallout 4*. It also explains why, now that I've finished this review, I'm going to play it for many hours more. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A brilliant and massive sandbox, albeit largely the same one that Bethesda has been making for years.

88

HOTH TAKE

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT is a gorgeous, accessible love letter to Star Wars, but a shallow FPS experience. ***By Andy Kelly***

There are no Gungans here. No pouty teenagers talking about sand. No tedious conversations about the taxation of trade routes. This is proper Star Wars. Speeder bikes, stormtroopers, and Imperial walkers. Han Solo, lightsabers, and sarlacc pits. *Battlefront* is the most successful attempt yet to recreate the look and feel of the original trilogy in a game, but as an FPS, it doesn't quite live up to those impressive production values.

In the thick of a 40-player battle, with X-wings screaming overhead, John Williams' score blaring, and laser fire criss-crossing the battlefield, *Star Wars Battlefront* can feel like the most exciting game ever made. Its large-scale battles are chaotic, breathless explosions of iconic Star Wars imagery, and it's hard not to get swept up in the spectacle. You really do feel like you're *in* the films. In that respect, it's a triumph.

There are four planets to fight on, each of which contain several maps. There's the desert world of Tatooine, the forest moon of Endor, the snowy plains of Hoth, and a volcanic planet called Sullust. Powered by DICE's Frostbite engine, they all look fantastic – especially the dense foliage and towering trees of Endor. Maps include the crash site of a Rebel transport ship on Endor, Echo Base and the surrounding snowfields from The Empire Strikes Back, and Tatooine's Jundland Wastes. They've captured the lighting, atmosphere and general feel of the movies perfectly.

They've captured the look and feel of the movies perfectly

And they're full of neat little fan-pleasing details too, like the Ewoks on Endor who scurry into their treehouses when you approach, Tusken Raiders on Tatooine watching battles from afar, and mouse droids squeaking around Imperial bases. It's clear the environment artists at DICE love Star Wars. These are superficial details, but add to the game's impressive authenticity. Every prop, from vehicles to random crates, droids, and computer terminals, looks like it has been plucked straight from the films.

Multiplayer infantry combat is the main focus of *Battlefront*. There are nine modes, ranging from smaller 3-6 player matches, to all-out battles for up to 40 people. These include the brilliant, hectic Walker Assault, where the Imperials defend a pair of AT-ATs and the Rebels try to destroy them, and Supremacy, in which two teams of 20 fight for control of five points on a large map. These are by far the best modes the game has to offer, mixing infantry and vehicle combat at a frantic pace.

FAMOUS FACES *Heroes, villains, and their abilities*

REBELS



LUKE SKYWALKER
Able to kill multiple enemies at once with a powerful, shotgun-like force push.



LEIA ORGANA
Drops power-ups and can protect herself with a large bubble shield.



HAN SOLO
A scoundrel with a rapid-fire blaster and a powerful shoulder charge.

EMPIRE



EMPEROR PALPATINE
The Empire's evil leader electrocutes enemies with force lightning.



BOBA FETT
Equipped with wrist-mounted rockets, a flamethrower, and a limited use jetpack.



DARTH VADER
Can force-choke enemies and throw his lightsaber like a deadly boomerang.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A multiplayer-focused FPS set in the Star Wars universe.

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
DICE

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 970, Intel i7-950, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Competitive (40 players), cooperative (2 players)

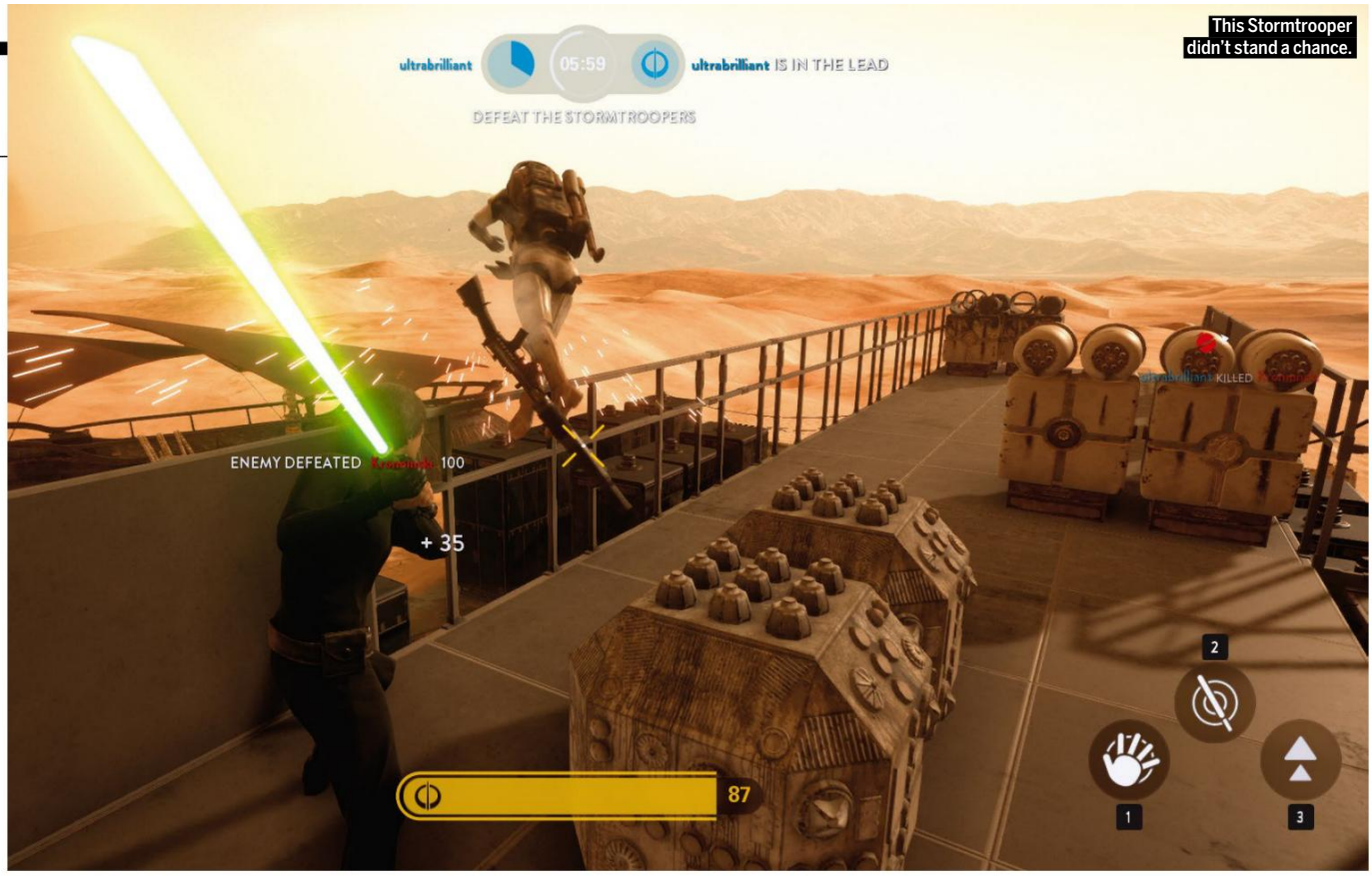
LINK
www.starwarsbattlefront.com

POWER TRIP

Unlike in previous *Battlefront* games, vehicles are accessed by picking up spinning power-ups. Grab an X-wing icon, hold down the activate button, and after a few seconds – providing you don't get shot – you'll magically appear in the air. Being able to see a vehicle on the battlefield, jump in, and take off seamlessly would have been much more immersive, but for whatever reason, you can't. Vehicles you can control include AT-ATs, AT-STs, A-wings, X-wings, and TIE fighters. And if you're lucky enough to grab a hero power-up, you can fly Slave I or the Millennium Falcon.

This would be more exciting if the ship combat wasn't basic to the point of feeling like a minigame. There's no weight or nuance to the flight model whatsoever, the differences between the ships are negligible, and the lock-on is so generous that it feels like it's doing most of the work for you. This, combined with the weightless, floaty controls, reduces Star Wars' famous dogfights to a joyless chore, and I've now reached the point where I just ignore starship power-ups if I see them. There's an entire mode dedicated to ship combat, Fighter Squadron, but it's a glorified shooting gallery.

It's when you're in the boots of a stormtrooper or Rebel soldier that the game is at its best, but the infantry combat has a few problems of its own. The blasters look and sound amazing – exactly as they do in the films – but they feel lightweight and weedy. And with



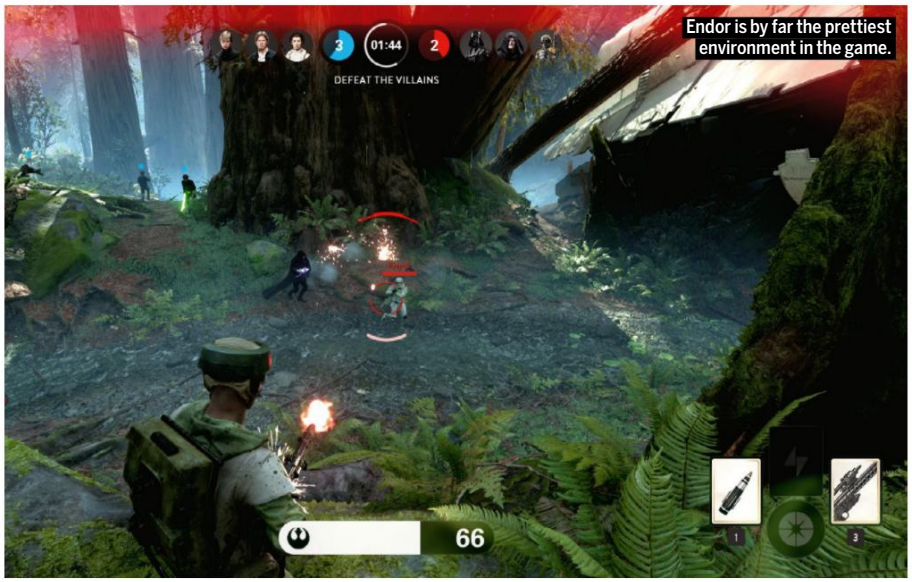
This Stormtrooper didn't stand a chance.





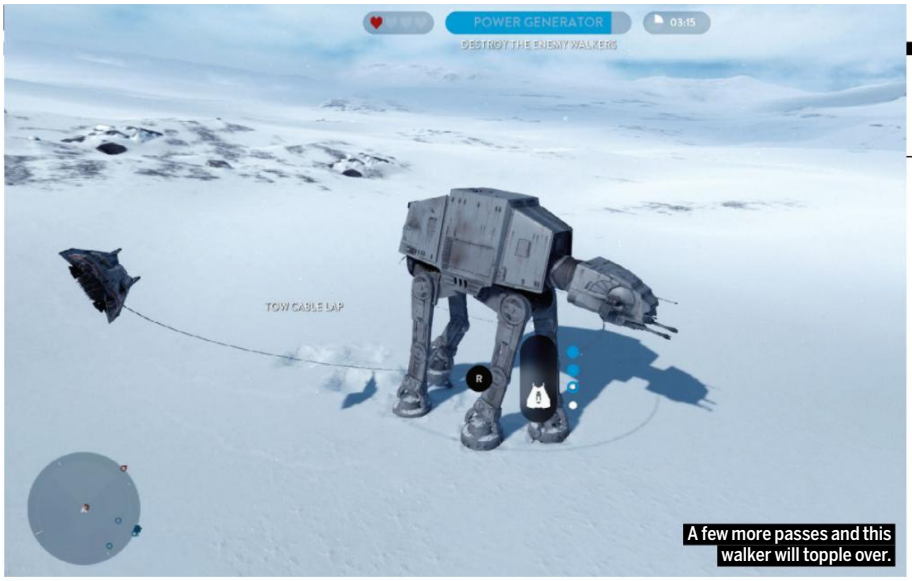


The walkers are always an impressive sight.

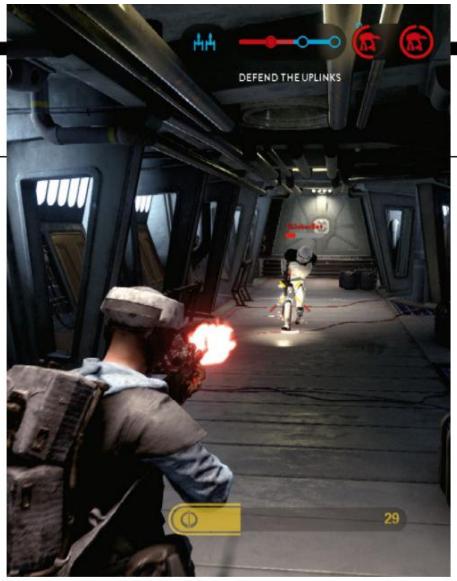


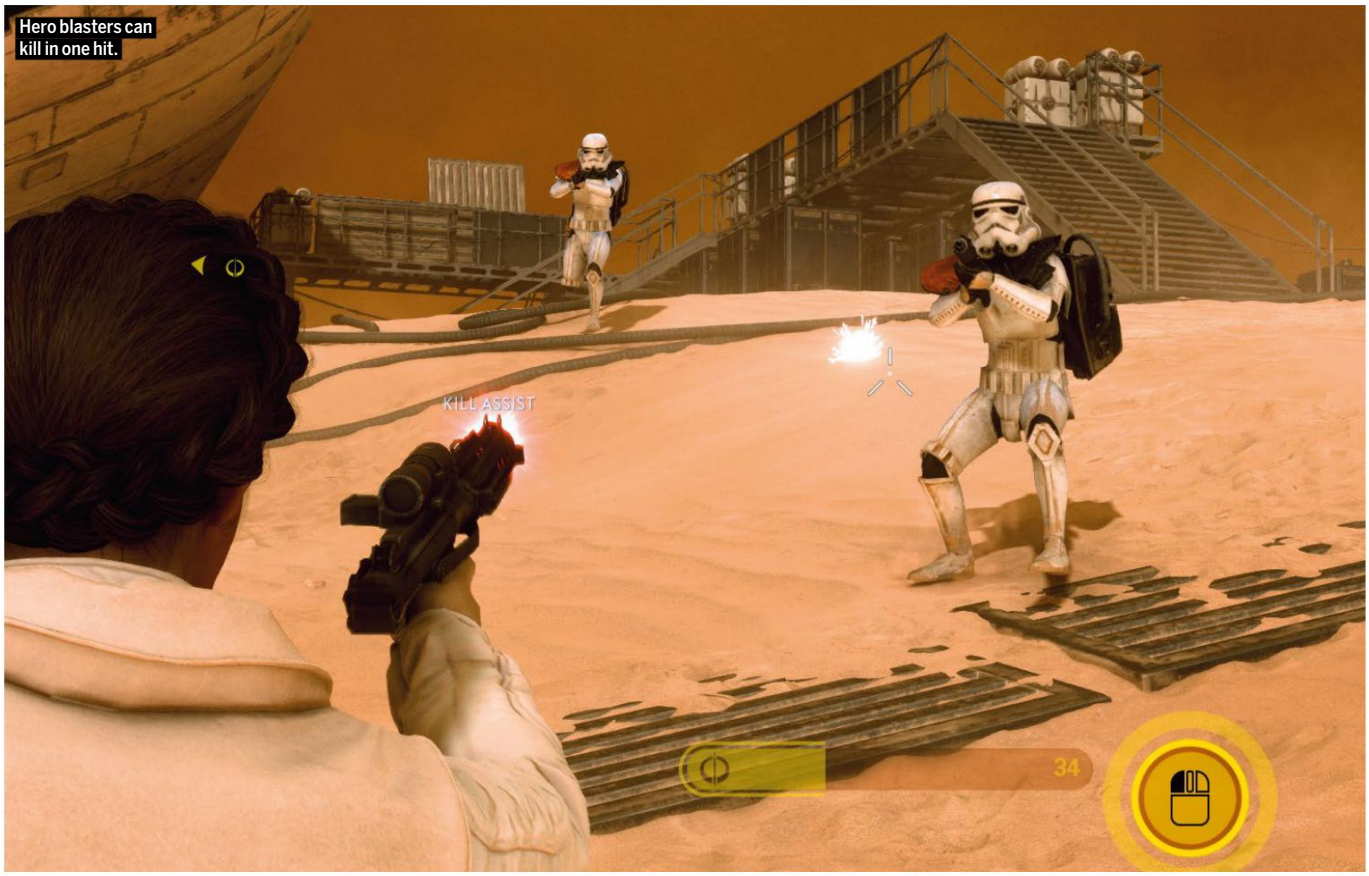
Endor is by far the prettiest environment in the game.


Fett is one of the best 'hero' characters.



A few more passes and this walker will topple over.

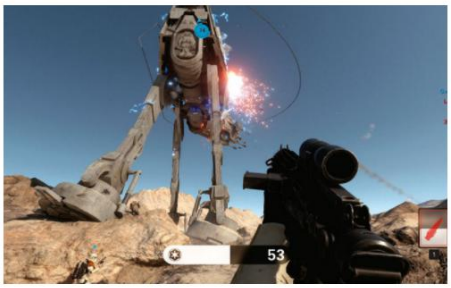




Hero blasters can kill in one hit.



There's no reloading, but blasters overheat.



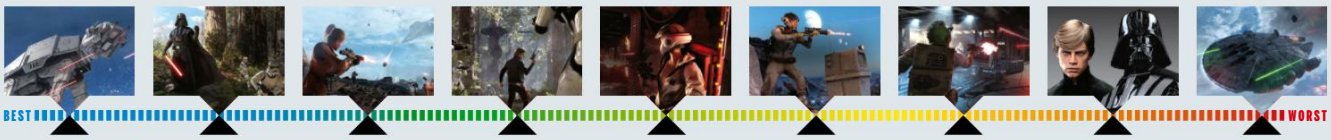


They're tough, but they ain't invincible.




The sound design is incredible.

STATE OF PLAY *Every mode, from best to worst*



WALKER ASSAULT
Destroy or protect a pair of massive Imperial walkers.

SUPREMACY
Fight for control of five points on a large map on-foot and in vehicles.

DROP ZONE
Two teams battle for control of escape pods as they fall from the sky.

HERO HUNT
Seven rebels or Stormtroopers fight against a single hero character.

CARGO
Basically just traditional capture the flag, but with boxes instead of flags.

DROID RUN
Capture and maintain control of three Gonk droids. Why? Who knows.

BLAST
A classic team deathmatch mode for 20 players. As basic as it gets.

HEROES VS VILLAINS
Three heroes and three villains fight to the death.

FIGHTER SQUADRON
Ship-to-ship dogfights in iconic Star Wars locations.

» such memorable names as the RT-97C, A280C, CA-87, T-21, and SE-14C, it's difficult to tell them apart. Some have a faster rate of fire, some are more powerful, some take longer to overheat, but they all feel vaguely the same. The moment-to-moment FPS combat lacks punch, which is a problem in a game that's largely about shooting people.

Star Cards are unlocked as you progress, and you can bring a 'hand' of three into battle with you. These are limited-use powers with a cooldown and include jetpacks, sniper rifles, thermal detonators and a really satisfying homing shot that chases locked-on enemies for ages. They're fun to use, but unlocking them is painfully slow.

CHILD'S PLAY

It's in the smaller modes like Blast (team deathmatch, basically) and Cargo (capture the flag) that the cracks begin to show. The Star Wars buzz wears off and you realise that you're playing a completely rote, by-the-numbers multiplayer FPS. You're on Tatooine, and there's a sandcrawler over there, but you're still just sprinting in circles, killing, dying, killing, dying. Earn XP, unlock a better gun, kill, die, kill, die. Outside of the big 40-player modes, *Battlefront* is disappointingly generic, and no amount of beautifully crafted, authentically recreated nostalgia can mask that fact.

But it does have some ideas of its own, including the ability for you to play a selection of famous Star Wars characters. The Empire gets Darth Vader, the Emperor, and Boba Fett, while Leia, Luke, and Han represent the Rebels. They have increased health, more powerful attacks, and unique powers including flying (Fett), force-choking (Vader), and dropping power-ups (Leia). I love watching players flee in terror as I approach them as Vader, but the heroes are far from invincible: it only takes the simplest of coordinated attacks by the opposing team to 'kill' them.

In Supremacy and Walker Assault, seeing Vader or Luke charging across the battlefield with their lightsabers glowing, or Boba Fett floating overhead launching rockets, is genuinely exciting, because it happens relatively rarely. But in Heroes vs Villains mode, where all six characters engage in battle at once, it just looks daft. I laugh every time the Emperor spins through the air like M. Bison doing a Psycho Crusher in *Street Fighter* – not helped by the fact that he sounds like Mr Bean. With a few exceptions (Han's pretty good), the voice acting is weirdly terrible. Vader sounds like a man speaking into a pint glass, and the guy playing Luke couldn't sound less like Mark Hamill if he tried.

It feels like they've sliced the game in half to sell the rest as DLC

For £50, you don't get much – and that price isn't likely to fall any time soon. After 20 hours with the game, I feel like I've seen everything several times over. I'm bored of most of the maps, and only feel compelled to return to a handful of its nine modes. It feels like they've sliced the game in half to sell the rest as DLC, and the £40 they're charging for the season pass is ridiculous. There's little depth to uncover, which has really harmed its longevity for me. I don't feel like my skills have developed in any meaningful way, as they would after 20 hours of something like *Counter-Strike*, because it's so basic.



But games are for everyone, and not every player wants a super deep FPS to master. *Battlefront* is, for all its flaws, wonderfully accessible. It's polished, easy to play, and the interface is simple and intuitive. They've created a game that anyone can play – from kids to adults – and that's admirable. Everyone loves Star Wars, and it reflects that mainstream, cross-generational appeal. But the downside of chasing such a broad audience is that, as a competitive shooter, it's fairly shallow.

It's a shame there's no singleplayer campaign either. A selection of fun missions that can be played either co-op or solo – an Endor-based speeder bike chase, destroying AT-ATs in the Battle of Hoth, assaulting Echo base as Vader – are proof that, if they were strung together with even a loose story, it could have worked. These missions, replicating key scenes from the films with some artistic licence, are among the most fun I had with the game – but there aren't enough of them.

Ultimately, the best rewards in *Battlefront* are the emotional ones: the thrill of weaving a speeder bike through the trees on Endor, seeing the twin suns of Tatooine, or watching Imperial walkers stomp across the Hoth snowfield. The addition of extra modes, weapons, heroes, and maps might improve the core shooter experience and give it some much-needed depth, but when it costs almost as much as the base game to get them, you have to question whether you're willing to spend £90 to find out. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Brilliantly captures the look and feel of classic Star Wars, but beneath its cinematic flair lies a fairly generic shooter.

72









BLUE BALLS

Can SONIC LOST WORLD redeem Sega's mascot? No. *By Phil Savage*

Maybe Sonic wouldn't be in this mess if, rather than spending his life making quips and waggling his finger, he'd settled down into a real job with a proper pension plan. He could have retired with some dignity. Instead, he's being dragged out for another sub-par platformer. He's a tired, ageing lesson in the importance of financial planning and stability – if not for himself, then for Sega.

There are things I like about *Sonic Lost World*. It's bright and vibrant, and varied enough within its rigid design. It also features mercifully little of Sonic's annoying friends. Instead, we get the Deadly Six – not so much characters as colours with a personality trait. One is purple and violent, another is green and vain. They're awful.

The port is reasonable. Coming to us from the Wii U (it should have stayed there,) the game runs smoothly at 60fps. That said, the aliasing results in cutscenes more jagged than my teeth after I'd ground them during the numerous, terrible attempts to spice up the core running and jumping. (In one section, I had to guide a fragile, inexplicably huge and deadly melon into a rotary blade. I'm still a bit angry about it.)

The Lost World is composed of multiple tubes and planetoids for Sonic to run over. Sometimes, to mix things up a bit, he runs inside them too. He must also navigate a weirdly rotating 2D plane full of references back to when *Sonic* games were good. *Super Mario Galaxy* is clearly an influence here, except, instead of joy, *Lost World*'s primary emotion is mournful malaise.

With the player in control, it's nothing like as smooth

The game plays itself for a few seconds as Sonic travels between islands. These are the best bits. They look fluid and exciting, and always do exactly what they're supposed to. With the player in control, it's nothing like as smooth. For an ostensibly speedy hedgehog, Sonic has no precision. This is fine during sections where all that's required is to go fast and avoid obstacles, but the moment the game asks for finesse, everything falls apart.

I like one level in *Sonic Lost World*. In Desert Ruin, Zone 2, Sonic runs down a hexagonal tree. There's a sense of momentum as he bashes through bees, weaves into hives and jumps across logs. Everywhere else, Sonic's flow is continuously broken. It's difficult to know whether the game values speed – supposedly Sonic's raison d'être – or exploration. The balance is trapped in the middle, rendering both options frustrating.

By giving *Lost World* contextual traversal mechanics – from parkour to lock-on attacks – a game about fine, exacting movements is lumbered with controls that rarely do what you want. Of the many lives I lost, all too few felt like a result of my own mistakes. And sometimes, Sonic's on ice – his already annoying imprecision made even worse.

Should you buy this? Maybe, if you have a DeviantArt page dedicated to Sonic. Even then, probably not. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 3D platformer starring a long-suffering blue hedgehog

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Sega

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 970, Intel i5-3570K, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.sonicthehedgehog.com

PC GAMER VERDICT

Sloppy controls make for an infuriating platformer. If you want a modern *Sonic* game, get *Generations* instead.

32

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INEVITABLE

A fun campaign can't save CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 3 from established series clichés. *By Ian Birnbaum*

C*all of Duty: Black Ops 3* hums with tension, pulled in two directions at once. It desperately wants to be a Hollywood blockbuster action movie, but finds that players, with their frustrating insistence on 'making choices' and 'having fun,' keep getting in the way. It's reborn every year like a pumpkin spice phoenix and, however many millions are spent to make it bigger and better, it always has that same familiar flavour.

CoD isn't made by rookie developers, though, so let's establish a few givens: this is a gorgeous FPS. It features wild set-pieces, good actors and guns that feel great. These are the things that make *Call of Duty* the giant that it is. *Black Ops 3* has an ambitious single-player campaign (which can also be played in co-op) that takes some wild chances, which it mostly almost manages to land, and it's easy to recommend as a loud, dumb action movie-ish experience.

This time around we have a robo-body with some fancy new tricks. Wall-jumping and an enhanced combat HUD are part of it, but the fun stuff includes a swarm of nanobots, the ability to melt circuit boards, and a sonic pulse that makes people puke until they die. The augmentation powers are fun enough to use that I don't care that they look, sound, and play just like Plasmids from *BioShock*.

It's easy to recommend as a loud, dumb action movie-ish experience

These powers are chosen as part of a mission loadout, so you can plan ahead by picking a shotgun, a rocket launcher and the ability to make people hallucinate attacking birds. Every once in a while, I'd sprint across a wall, tear out a robot's heart, throw it at a fuel tank, and blow someone's head off. Enemy movement isn't dynamic enough to make aiming a real challenge, but I enjoy the improvisation. Mixing movement with melee, shooting with augmentation powers, and environmental hazards with grenades invariably make me feel like a badass.

But while *Black Ops 3* loosens up a bit, some of *CoD*'s bad habits remain. There are turret sequences that don't care if you shoot anything as long as you watch the explosions. There are at least three of those slow-mo breach-and-clear sequences. But the worst part of the game is in the skies over Egypt, where a fighter jet attack sequence screamed at me to pull up, pull up, pull up for God's sake. I took my hand off the mouse and watched the dogfight resolve itself. Why do they even bother with this bullshit?

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The biggest FPS franchise in the world

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Treyarch

PUBLISHER
Activision

REVIEWED ON
Windows 8, i5 4690k, 8GB RAM, GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
Online, local splitscreen

LINK
www.callofduty.com/blackops3

NONSTOP BLOPS

There are no mysteries to the multiplayer: if you like fast-paced *CoD* multiplayer, this is your annual update jam. Most of the guns from the campaign are available in multiplayer, and all feel beefy and powerful. The big addition is a set of character classes, each with its own unique skill. The characters look a little different, but only in minor ways that get completely lost in the blur of battle. Compared to other character-based multiplayer shooters like *Team Fortress 2*, *Black Ops 3* classes felt like an afterthought.

The zombie survival mode has been reworked into *Left 4 Dead* meets 1940s noir. I love the noir setting, and there's some hilarious voice acting from Ron Perlman and Jeff Goldblum. A new power-up lets players turn into a multi-tentacled Cthulu-oid beast, capable of ripping zombies apart and stunning crowds with electricity, but this is mechanically the same zombie mode we played in *Black Ops 2*.

There's a lot to do and see in the multiplayer modes, even if I do find them exhausting and repetitive, and I enjoyed my time in the campaign. Appreciating *Black Ops 3* is like enjoying a great B-movie: it's not the best story around and it isn't going to pack an emotional punch, but it's loud, it's flashy, and it makes me have a good time. I just wish *CoD*'s brand of dumb action didn't come around every 12 months so I could have a chance look forward to it for once. ■

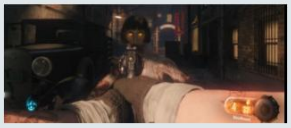
BRING OUT YER DEAD *Dos and don'ts of the zombie wave mode*



DO save ammo by using your knife in early rounds.



DO rebuild barricades often.



DO wait for clean headshots.



DO stick close to a friend.



DON'T follow the map. You have a great sense of direction.



DON'T quote lines from Shaun of the Dead. Everyone's sick of it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The graphics get a little prettier, the story gets a little darker, and another *CoD* counts time as we march toward death.

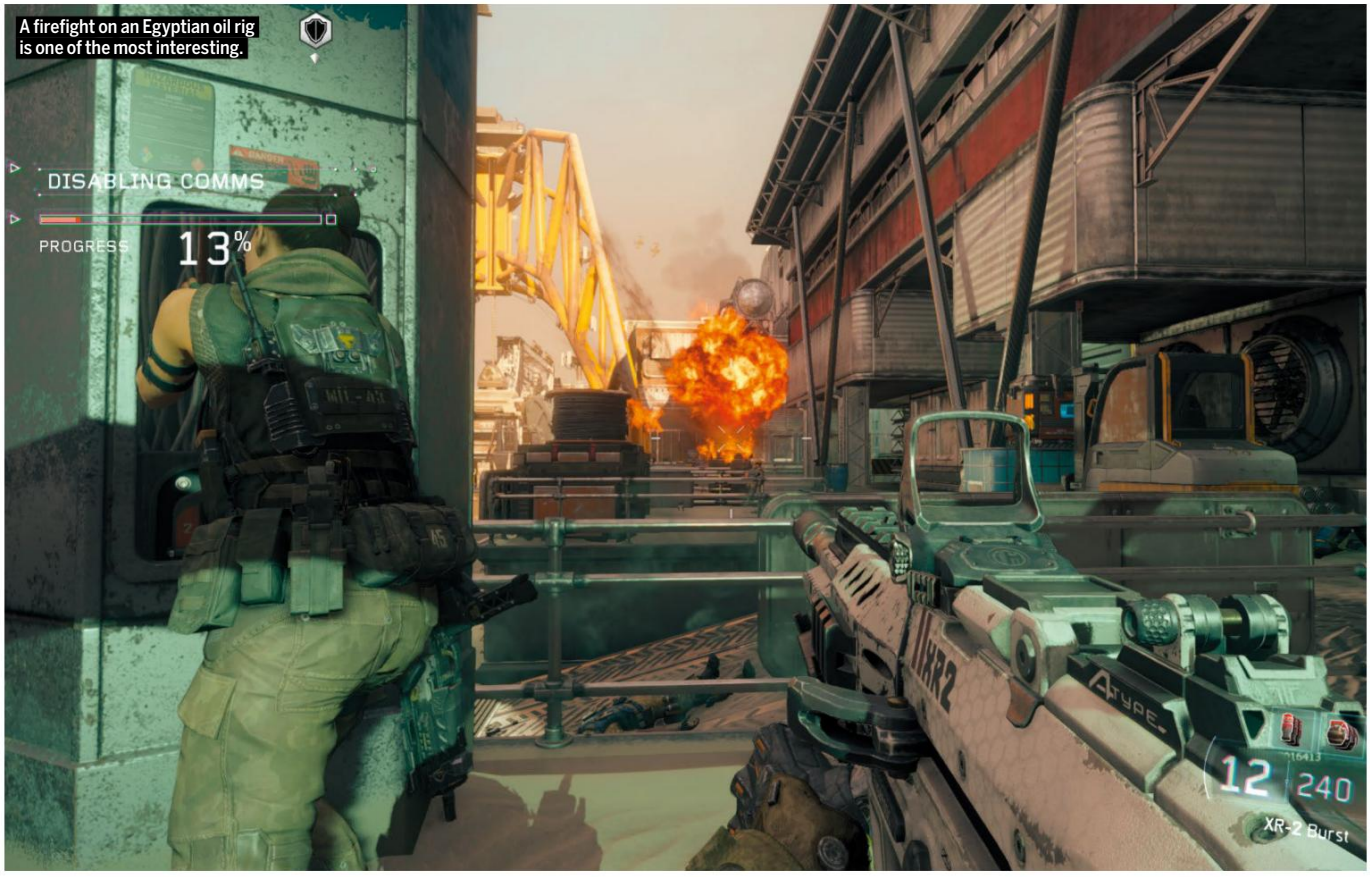
75



The light and weather effects are particularly good.




Don't glare at me Meloni. You brought us here.



A firefight on an Egyptian oil rig is one of the most interesting.



Somebody order a terrorist, extra crispy?



Moments later he put down his gun and we shook hands.




In co-op you can help knocked-down mates get back up.



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MAJOR LASER

STARCRAFT II: LEGACY OF THE VOID brings a seventeen-year epic to a fitting close. *By Chris Thursten*

I am not the world's greatest *StarCraft* player. That – currently – is a guy called sOs. You might have heard of him: he was the one lifting that heavy-looking trophy at the World Championship at BlizzCon. sOs became the world's greatest *StarCraft* player by defeating somebody called Life in a seven-game series – a test of physical dexterity, mental acuity and psychological endurance in excess of any other competitive computer game.

StarCraft's competitive element has become the thing it is best known for over the course of the series' long life. That makes sense: it's the original stadium-filling esport and one of the most skill-intensive games ever made. For the long-term fans who know *StarCraft* primarily in this regard, *Legacy of the Void* marks the start of the game's new era. It's a suite of new units, features and balance changes that will define the character of the game for the next couple of years.

From my position of limited skill, I can tell you that *Legacy of the Void*'s changes make the competitive game faster, more skill-intensive, and less fiddly. There's a greater emphasis on making big decisions early. You begin your match with more worker units than you used to, and the business of setting up your economy has been streamlined. Fights happen faster and, as a consequence, matches are shorter. You might get caught out by a rush strategy you didn't see coming: you type 'GG', surrender, tab out to TeamLiquid, read up on your counters, tab back, and you're playing again within a minute. It is easier than ever to lose evenings to the ladder in this way.

That elevated skill ceiling is a consequence of new units that become dramatically more powerful if you're capable of micromanaging them effectively. One example is the Protoss Adept, a ranged infantry unit that can act as an alternative to Stalkers and Zealots. In and of itself, the Adept is capable enough – but its real power comes from Psionic Transfer, which creates a ghostly duplicate of the Adept that is controlled separately. These doppelgangers are invulnerable and after seven seconds the Adept teleports to the ghost's location. Suddenly, new strategic pathways open: around entrenched positions and into worker lines, past the enemy's own targeted abilities and (hopefully) into victories that go beyond cheeses and strict counters.

> ***Legacy* supports the notion that *StarCraft* is a difficult game**

Legacy of the Void wholeheartedly supports the notion that *StarCraft* is a difficult game and that player skill should be respected. If you get too tired or anxious to climb the ladder, there are also automated tournament brackets that run every couple of hours. These allow you to experience some of the drama of structured play without any of the logistical hassle. You're playing for bragging rights, ultimately, but it rounds out the experience and it's something I wish more competitive games would offer.

OPEN SPACE

The reason *Legacy of the Void* comes highly recommended, however, is that it also supports the idea that you should be able to have fun regardless of how good you are. The competitive game has been allowed to change in ways that make it deeper, but the game as a whole is broad and generous in its provision of entry points for new players.

If competitive *StarCraft* has become an art, then *Legacy of the Void*'s campaign offers a colour-by-numbers alternative for those still developing their abilities. As in *Wings of Liberty* and *Heart of the Swarm*, Blizzard treat singleplayer as its own entity, with its own units and rules. The final part of the trilogy tasks you with uniting the fragmented factions of the Protoss race from aboard an ancient warship, the Spear of Adun. Your ship and the factions you pick up form the basis of the extra toys you get to play with. Where James Raynor had his upgrades and Kerrigan had her mutations, Protoss Hierarch Artanis picks between multiple versions of the same unit type. There are Templar and Dark Templar variants on the basic melee zealot, for example, with further options unlocked as additional Protoss forces are recruited.

Then, the Spear of Adun itself can be upgraded by investing resources gathered by completing optional

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The fifth and final entry in Blizzard's sci-fi RTS series.

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Blizzard

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5-2500K, 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
Local and online

LINK
www.battle.net

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

NOT EVEN MY FINAL FORM *A single Protoss unit and its variants*



PHOENIX
An air-superiority fighter that can use a Graviton Beam to lift up to two ground units to fight them where they're helpless.



CORSAIR
Returning from the original game, Corsairs can now disable the attacks of ground units below them, granting them a potent support role.



MIRAGE
A robotic variant on the Phoenix with weaker Graviton Beam that can 'phase' to avoid damage. A little more forgiving of sloppy play.

I hold *StarCraft II*'s many lasers in high regard.







Terrans have few lasers. This is why they are awful.

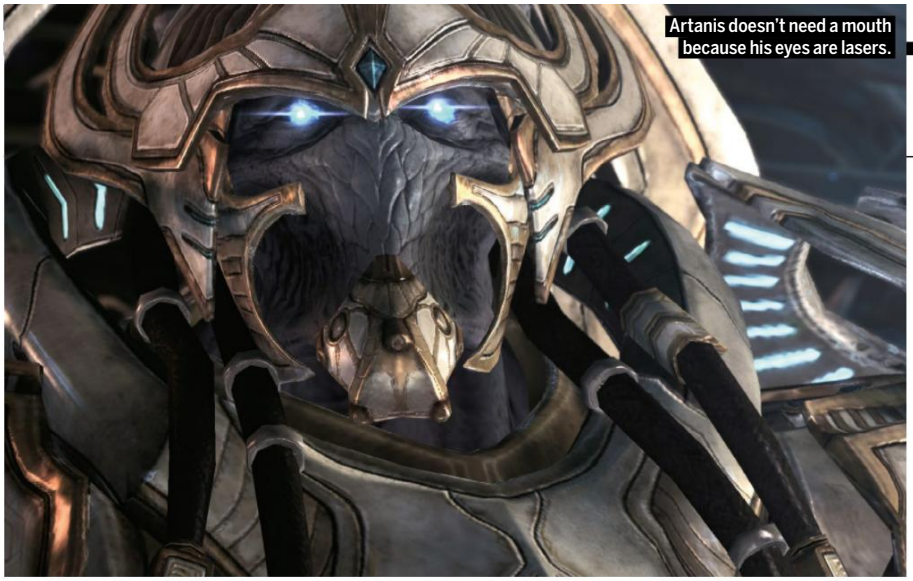


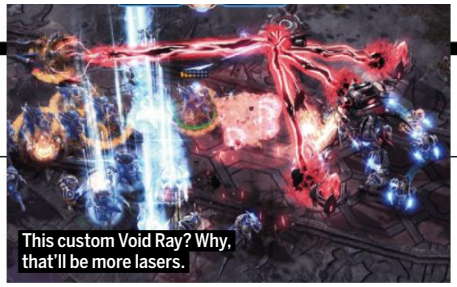
The lasers live inside this spaceship. Hello, lasers!





Spice up your relationship with lasers: do it vertically!


Artanis doesn't need a mouth because his eyes are lasers.

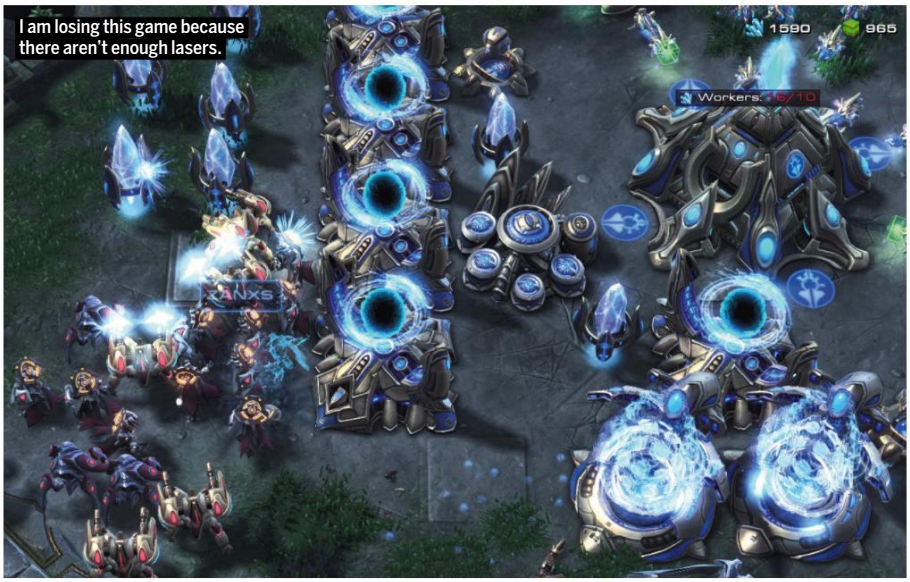

This custom Void Ray? Why, that'll be more lasers.




Main Objectives
Destroy Void Shards (3/5)
Bonus Objectives
38
I wouldn't be where I am today without each of these lasers.
34:59
Menu
to Move
(A) then
ground to Auto-attack


This is a bad laser, but I don't mind. Naughty laser!




I am losing this game because there aren't enough lasers.
1590
965
Workers:

objectives within each mission. Some of these upgrades are passive, such as increased build speed, increased starting supplies, and shield regeneration. Others are active, deployed mid-battle from a new command interface along the top of the screen. These include direct attacks – orbital strikes, bombardments, a giant moveable laser, and so on – and support powers, such as the ability to freeze time for enemy units or summon a Pylon along with reinforcements anywhere on the battlefield.

Taken in combination, this degree of customisation enables you to tailor your approach to suit your style and skill level. I prefer a slow siege, with Stalkers supported by forcefield-emitting Sentries and, later, Immortals and Colossi. I put together a tweaked variant on that, with artillery-spewing Immortal variants protecting a new kind of Sentry that lays down a power grid, allowing me to warp fresh Stalkers right to the front line. As the scale of each mission increases, there's a real thrill to seeing a plan like this come together: the glow of dozens of Protoss units warping in at once, the angry red beams of custom Void Rays strafing waves of zerglings that pop *just so*.

After over five years of *StarCraft II*, the new missions don't manage to feel quite as fresh or original as *Wings of Liberty*'s did when it came out. Though I wouldn't say there were any especially weak links, certain objectives get repetitive after a while. You will track down and destroy three different objectives while also hunting for two or three different *optional* objectives on several worlds and in several different contexts, albeit with new units and powers to prevent each encounter from feeling exactly the same as the last.

FORM AND VOID

There are certainly exceptions to this rule. One mission strands your base on a landlocked island with minimal resources, but allows you to move that island along rails to reach new areas. Another allows you to command three different squads of Protoss hero units in succession, completing multiple objectives at once in three different parts of a world. In still another you join allied Terran forces in a battle against their corrupt counterparts. Every few minutes, a psychic blast leaves every Terran on the battlefield incapacitated – friends and foe alike. This is either an opportunity to lay waste to a defenceless enemy or time to defend your stricken ally depending on how ruthless you're feeling. There's rarely a mission where *Legacy of the Void* doesn't innovate along these lines, but certain designs stand out more than others.

This is a game from the universe where the RTS never went away

The core Protoss campaign is the shortest of the series so far, but it's bookended by mini-campaigns that, collectively, amount to a substantial and largely gratifying conclusion to the series. The nebulous cosmic threat spoken of in cutscenes from *Brood War* onwards finally arrives, and is dealt with not just by the Protoss but by the Terran and Zerg characters that you've come to know as well. Raynor and Kerrigan get their ending, as do Zeratul, Artanis, and all of the other Protoss who (if you're me) you've probably confused with each other over the almost two decades that Blizzard has been telling this story.

There was a risk that a Protoss narrative could end up feeling dry and this holds true to a certain degree. The Protoss are part elf, part Vulcan, part Marvel Comics Asgardian: they're big and gold and Shakespearean and silly, and if you take the time to talk to everybody onboard the Spear of Adun you'll have more than your share of conversations about Templars and Nerazim and Tal'darim and the Khala and so on. Blizzard commits to this wholeheartedly and a huge investment has been made in furnishing the campaign with impressive cinematic moments. If you are a fan already, this is a party being put on to serve your very specific interests. If you are not, it may mean little if you haven't at least played *Wings of Liberty* and *Heart of the Swarm*. Nonetheless, it has heart: that loud technicolour exploding metal album cover heart that finds its way into most Blizzard games.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Which of these words do the Protoss not regularly say to one another?

KHALA

AMON

AVOCADO

PURIFIER

TAL'DARIM

BENE GESSERIT

PAUL DANAN

EN TARO

DAELAAM

PSIBLADE

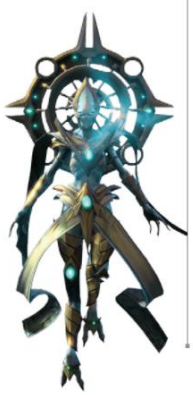
WE HAVE PLENTY OF VESPENE GAS

Answers: *Bene Gesserit, Avocado, Paul Danan, We have plenty of Vespene gas*

OUTSIDE THE BOX

For the first time in *StarCraft II*, some of that freeform campaign feel makes its way into multiplayer. In co-op, you and a friend (or an online stranger) pick commanders that each offer a different spin on their faction, complete with unique special powers and distinct units. You then take on objective-based missions at varying difficulty levels for XP, which unlock new abilities, units, and so on. This is a brilliant addition: it gets more life out of units designed for singleplayer, and provides a welcoming way into multiplayer for those daunted by it

Legacy of the Void feels like a Blizzard game from another era – one where the box you buy (or download, I guess) contains a wide variety of experiences and promises to sustain investment for a long time to come. This is a game from the universe where the RTS never went away, where they kept getting made and improved over the course of decades. I'd say "they don't make them like this any more" – but they clearly do. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

A brilliant strategy game that manages to be both broad and deep, challenging and accessible.

91

RATTASHOOTY

WARHAMMER: END TIMES – VERMINTIDE nails what great co-op should be. ***By Ian Birnbaum***

V*ermintide* – or, to use its Fully Licensed Intellectual Property name, *Warhammer: End Times – Vermintide* – is a co-op shooter that borrows heavily from Valve's *Left 4 Dead* series. It borrows so heavily it feels larcenous, really, but damned if it isn't a great homage. And if you're tired of zombies, well, here we have rats.

In the world of *Vermintide*, the end times are extremely nigh. A tide of angry ratlings, the Skaven, have risen up to swallow the realms of men. In the city of Ubersreik, a plucky band of mismatched heroes fights the vermin menace. From their base of operations, the team ventures out into the city's filthy streets to save the world from a ratty apocalypse.

Vermintide is in many ways *Left 4 Dead* with a *Warhammer* skin. Characters yell out the locations of ammunition dumps and bandages, cry out when a rush of Skaven is on the way, and beg for help when they're injured. Some missions involve gathering barrels of fuel and depositing them in a getaway vehicle. You know that swoopy camera move that pans over every *L4D* stage, then zooms into the back of your character's head? *Vermintide* does that, too. However, the meat makes *Vermintide* its own experience.

Five distinct characters battle Skaven, each with their own strengths, equipment, and playstyles. Between missions, players choose gear sets that change how characters play. Weapon classes have different characteristics, but individual weapons have special abilities or damage boosts. Getting a sword and shield combo can give a new player the ability to play the role of party tank. Getting a new, more powerful warhammer can be cause for celebration, an excuse to load up the first level and try it right away. But while the five heroes play in very different ways, as a team the characters are forced to work together in a tight group due to the danger of being alone – it's easy to get surrounded or overwhelmed by a pack of Skaven, and only a friend can revive you.

The only thing that truly disappoints me is the Skaven themselves

SPIT AND POLISH

Vermintide's combat shines with the polish of expertise. While limited ammo stocks force ballistics to the background, and controlling angle or direction doesn't change a swipe into a stab – the heroes simply attack, charge up for a special attack, block, and shove – the system's simplicity helps sell the power and solidity of the combat. Great sound design adds to the brutality.

Vermintide is also a beautiful game – or, at least, a beautiful rendition of a town hip-deep in rat shit. In the first level, my entire team stopped to stare across the rooftops of Ubersreik bathed in the light of a full moon. Later, the magic in a mage's tower twisted the architecture inside until doorways inexplicably led to upside-down ceilings, and ratkin poured up horizontal stairways set into the walls.

The only thing that truly disappoints me about *Vermintide* is the Skaven themselves. As a group, they're a fine replacement for *Left 4 Dead*'s wobbling zombie hoards. As individuals, though, the special ratkin are a paper-thin gloss over *L4D*'s special infected. The Rat Ogres have lost their prosthetic sword-arms and multiple heads and been watered down until they're just furry, large-toothed versions of the zombie Tank. The Pack Master, whose sole job in *Warhammer* lore is to keep Rat Ogres from killing their own allies, instead skulks around alone looking for heroes to drag away: the ratkin version of the zombie Smoker.

However, my quibbles with the rats are separate from my love of fighting these vicious critters: absolutely every bad guy in the game is a joy to conquer, run from, and kill. Heroic comebacks against unbelievable odds and acts of great sacrifice are commonplace.

Vermintide is smart, chaotic, and beautiful. It's a game that has got me hooked on Warhammer Fantasy fiction in a way I wasn't before. It's difficult, bloody, and it's my favourite co-op game to come along in years. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Co-op melee FPS set in Warhammer Fantasy

EXPECT TO PAY
£23

DEVELOPER
Fatshark

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 8, Core i5, 8GB RAM, GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
Online, co-op

LINK
www.vermintide.com

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

MEET THE HEROES *There's no lack of power here...*



VICTOR
the witch hunter. Likes: Long walks on the beach. Dislikes: Sinners, fun of any kind.



KERILLIAN
the elf archer. Never met a man she couldn't kill with a headshot from 500ft.



BARDIN
the dwarf. Good with hammers and axes. Hates getting food stuck in his beard.



SIENNA
the flame mage. Explodes if she overheats from her pyrotechnics, but it sure looks pretty.



MARKUS
the sergeant. Harnesses the explosive power of his moustache to annihilate enemies.

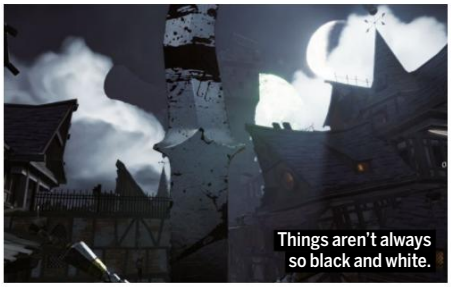
PC GAMER VERDICT

It takes too much inspiration from *Left 4 Dead*, but *Vermintide* is nonetheless a brilliant twist on the formula.

90

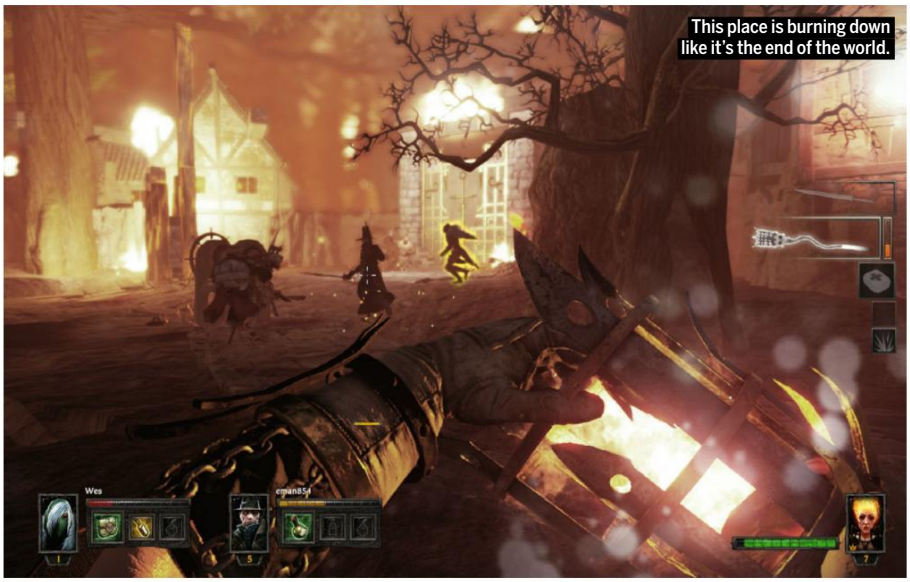

Skavenslaves are naked and armed with broken metal.




Things aren't always so black and white.


Sure, the location is nice, but look at this layout.


Stormvermin are armoured and always a tough fight.


This place is burning down like it's the end of the world.


Verticality and open space are good for a blackpowder headshot.
Enter The Garden Of Morr
Kerillian aided Bardin Goreksson
Bardin Goreksson
Markus Kruber
Kerillian

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

JUST CAUSE 3 is a superficial symphony of destruction.

By Andy Kelly

The explosions in *Just Cause 3* are really, really good. They're elaborate, extravagant eruptions of fire, debris and smoke. And when you blow something up, the ensuing fireball spreads to other objects around it, triggering a massive, destructive chain reaction. It's a brand of fiery devastation that Michael Bay would describe as "too much". But that's it. When the fires burn out, you're left with a simplistic, strangely dull action game.

Rico Rodriguez returns as the protagonist, and seems, over the course of three games, to have slowly transformed from Antonio Banderas into Nathan Drake. This time he's liberating Medici, a chain of islands in the Mediterranean controlled by cartoon dictator Sebastiano Di Ravello. This sadistic, egotistical, medal-studded despot rules the country with an iron fist, and it's your job to dramatically blow up that fist.

Rico has always been a man who smirks in the face of physics, but in *Just Cause 3* it's a hearty belly laugh. A new gadget, the wingsuit, lets you soar across the map, and it's brilliant. You can keep going forever by shooting your grappling hook at the ground and pulling yourself forward. It makes no sense, and is one step away from flying, but combined with the old parachute combo, moving around Medici is a blast.

Every enemy base has a shopping list of objects for you to destroy

Di Ravello's hold on the islands is represented by enemy-controlled towns, airports, military bases, radar installations, prisons and other establishments. The general rule is, if it's red, you have to destroy it. By reducing these areas to rubble, you win territory back for the rebels. Blow up every enemy settlement in a region and it turns blue on the map, indicating that you've driven the enemy away completely. Your ultimate goal is to take control of all of Medici and oust its dictator. A just cause indeed.

But it's not long before it starts to feel like a chore. Every enemy base has a long shopping list of objects you need to destroy – fuel tanks, generators, radar dishes, etc. You charge around chucking grenades and launching rockets until every red thing has been checked off. The explosions are amazing, but they're a fireworks display. A flashy distraction. Compare this to the rich, rewarding, interlinking systems of something like *Metal Gear Solid V*, and you realise that *Just Cause 3* has no compelling depth whatsoever.

This being a sandbox game, you'd think I would be able to just avoid this stuff altogether and find something else to do. There are story missions – in which you'll find some genuinely memorable, imaginative set-pieces – but they're often locked until you free a certain amount of territory on the world map. So to advance the story and see the next exciting thing, you're railroaded into blowing up red things. So many red things. It's an unnecessary restriction in a game that celebrates freedom.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open-world action game about destroying a dictatorship.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Avalanche Studios

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 970, Intel i7-950, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.justcause.com

WORLD WEARY

Medici is massive, but there's no sense of discovery. When you see something in the distance, there's no mystery about what it might be: it's almost certainly a load of red things waiting patiently to be exploded. It's colourful and the geography is varied, but it feels empty. Your only real interactivity with your surroundings is destroying them. And when you destroy something, it's gone forever, removing that interactivity.

It's not a bad game: just an underwhelming one. There are moments of wonderful, anarchic chaos that make you feel like the world's coolest action hero. And it's an amusing physics playground, letting you tether objects with a wire and tighten it to smash them together. But that can only hold your attention for so long, and boredom soon sets in. All the explosions in the world can't hide the fact that *Just Cause 3* is marred by simplistic design and an uninspiring world. ■

POWER TO THE PEOPLE *A brief history of political revolt*

HAITIAN REVOLUTION 1791
Slaves defy their masters and reclaim Haiti. Slavery is later abolished.



RUSSIAN REVOLUTION 1917
The Bolsheviks overthrow the Russian monarchy and capture its palace.



CUBAN REVOLUTION 1952
Rebels led by Fidel Castro use guerrilla tactics to oust Cuba's president.



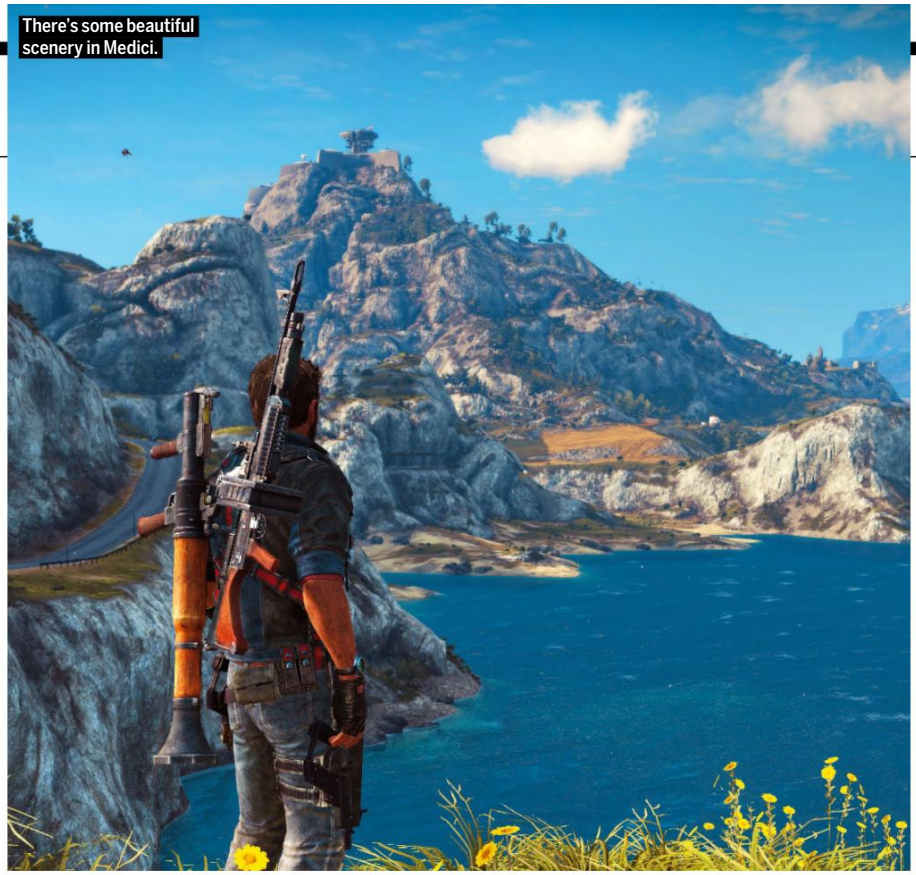
MEDICIAN REVOLUTION 2015
Rico Rodriguez blows up everything painted red with a rocket launcher.

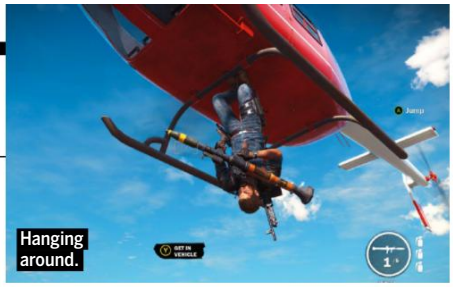


PC GAMER VERDICT

The explosions are undeniably amazing and it's fun in short bursts, but *Just Cause 3* is far from revolutionary.

67


There's some beautiful scenery in Medici.

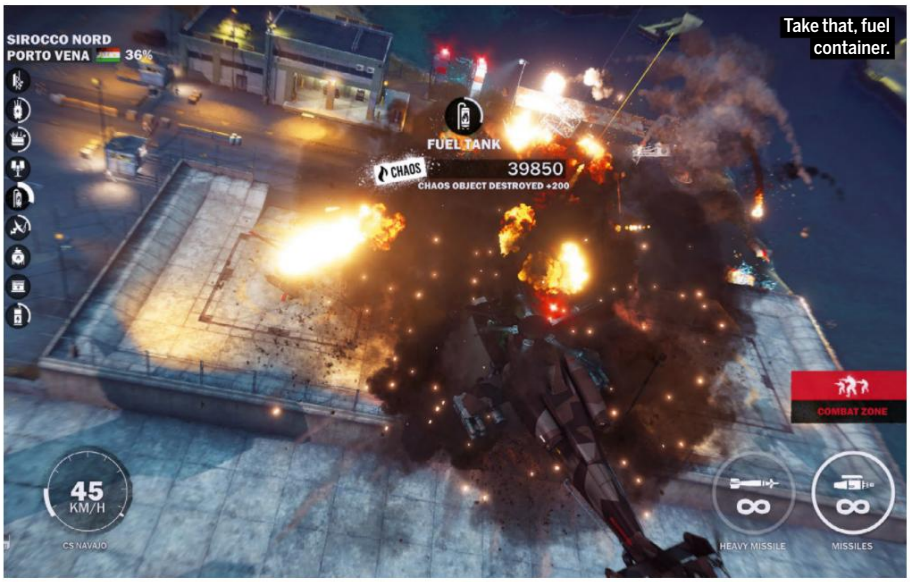

Hanging around.

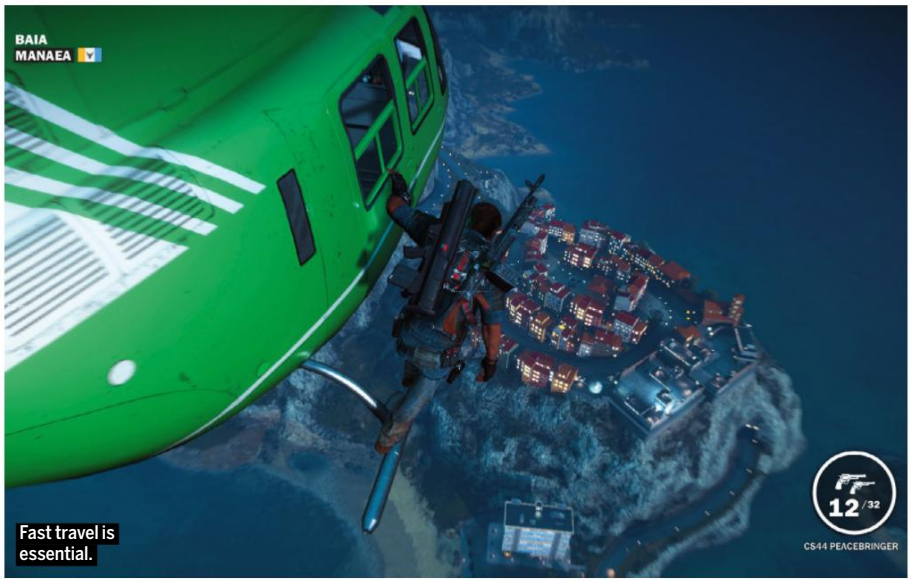

Explosions? Yes. Lots.








Take that, fuel container.
SIROCCO NORD
PORTO VENA 36%
FUEL TANK
CHAOS
39850
CHAOS OBJECT DESTROYED +200
COMBAT ZONE
45
KM/H
CS NAVAJO
HEAVY MISSILE
MISSILES


BAIA
MANAEA
Fast travel is essential.
12/32
CS44 PEACEBRINGER


Rico looks very different these days.

ACE OF SPACE

Why it's a lot of fun to be a showboating space spelunker in GALAK-Z: THE DIMENSIONAL. *By Chris Schilling*

I got cocky. I'd reached the objective marker, but found myself ambushed by an enemy fleet. Too many to take on in such an enclosed space, I opted for flight over fight, hoping to either lose them en route to the extraction point, or isolate them and pick them off one by one. Weaving through a labyrinth of tunnels, I passed by a spider's lure of space junk, wheeling away a split-second before it lurched forward and grabbed one of my pursuers.

I blasted a bulbous plant, which released electrically charged pollen into the path of another, obliterating his shields just in time for him to see a missile salvo arc toward his cockpit. Laughing, I boosted clear... and straight into the hungry grasp of a giant space bug. I died less than a screen's width away from the exit.

Galak-Z is great when things are going right, but it's brilliant when they're going wrong – and there are plenty of ways for that to happen. On one occasion I decided to take things slowly, methodically advancing through a maze-like interior, staying beyond the sight cones of patrolling craft where possible and luring lone ships into devious traps. Having amassed a tidy haul of scrap, I meandered toward the exit, only to be struck by a jet of flame that had burst forth from a hole in a pipe. Startled, I panicked, shooting a gas tank that whirled around before settling on a trajectory that saw it smash into my cockpit and explode, removing my final sliver of health.

This sci-fi roguelike has rightly earned its fearsome reputation

This sci-fi roguelike has rightly earned its fearsome reputation. You will perish, and often. I won't lie and claim failure isn't frustrating, but win or lose, you'll have a wonderful time doing so. It may not always be fair, but then it wouldn't be a roguelike without fortune involved. And, if only occasionally, it will fall in your favour.

But luck comes a distant second to skill. *Galak-Z* might have a steep learning curve, but it's a reminder that mastering an unorthodox control system can be hugely enjoyable. At its simplest level, it's like Asteroids, in that you rotate to aim and thrust to move in that direction, but it's more nuanced than that. At times I wondered if I would've preferred more manoeuvrability at the cost of weight, but I'm happy with the balance: with maximum thrust speed, your ship is on the brink of feeling skittish. If the odds can seem unfair, you're given the tools to escape the stickiest of situations, whether you're strafing, boosting, or applying your rear jets to get out of harm's way.

Then there's the juke, which sees your ship spin out of the screen and dive back in. It's a showboater's dream, designed to encourage dangerous play – like boosting towards an enemy, lifting off at the last second to land behind your opponent, and swivelling to unleash a barrage into its rear. Worth the risk? Undoubtedly, though the screeching insectoids, powerful empire fleets and snarling raiders you'll face are not to be underestimated. They're often smart, yet capable of errors in judgement – with clever positioning you can get a larger craft to blast its diminutive allies before they race off to call backup, or get two factions to fight one another, distracting them long enough to peel away to safety.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A stylish, intelligent shooter with permadeath.

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
17-Bit Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-4440 CPU @ 3.1GHz, 8GB

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
www.17-bit.com/galakz

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

EPISODIC

And if the 25 randomly generated missions are all, broadly speaking, salvage quests, *Galak-Z* works hard to contextualise your adventures. It takes place over five TV-style 'seasons', with five episodes in each. It looks and sounds for all the world like a great lost Saturday morning cartoon from the '80s and while the overarching plot won't win any awards, the script is light and witty and the performances are terrific – likeable protagonist A-Tak and his officer Beam share a warm rapport. There's even something moving about the game over screen, which shows an empty helmet with a cracked visor floating by, a brutal reminder of the stakes.

But as much as it stings to lose a ship equipped with half a dozen permanent perks, there are enough thrilling discoveries to dull the pain. Indeed, by the beginning of the second season you'll have a whole new series of combat techniques to learn. Its final surprise for PC owners is a mode that unlocks checkpoints after every episode rather than forcing you to survive an entire season with just one life. Reaching the end may still be beyond some players, but putting the bountiful rewards of *Galak-Z* within the reach of many more budding space cadets can only be a good thing. ■

SCRAP METTLE

How to avoid being turned into space junk

DON'T SHOOT!
Why start a fight when you can easily avoid it? Give your trigger finger a break and only open fire when the way ahead is blocked. Oh, and save your missiles for the toughest opponents.



JUNK AROUND
It doesn't always pay to head straight for the mission marker. Weigh up the value of upgrade chests against the risk of tackling the enemies you tend to find nearby.



START SMALL
In a battle, focus on the smaller ships first – some will get reinforcements, while others can be a real nuisance when you need to take down more powerful vessels.

USE PROTECTION
The best value item you can buy, particularly in the early game, is a temporary shield. This will stop your permanent energy barrier from depleting, allowing you to stay in fights longer.

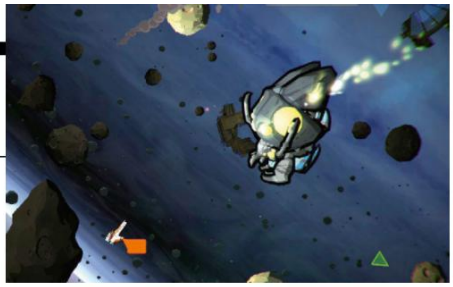
PC GAMER VERDICT

Challenging but immaculately calibrated controls power an exciting and enormously rewarding sci-fi roguelike.

88



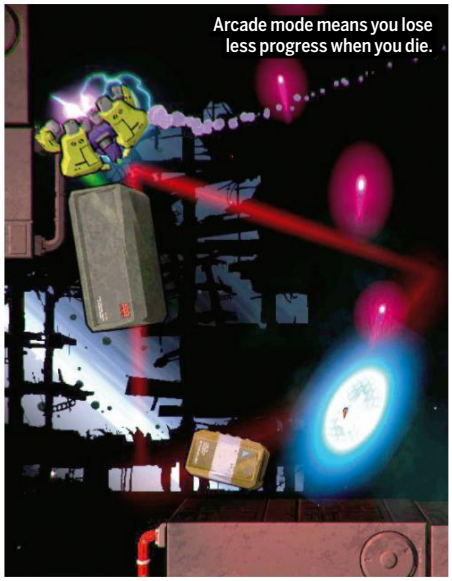





SECTOR 18.788 (M55)
DESTROY THE MACHINERY
5
+4
370
6/16
Redeem crash coins to get a head-start with perks.


A faint blue ring around your ship shows the range at which enemies can hear you.


The weighty rumble from boosts and explosions feels great on a pad.


Arcade mode means you lose less progress when you die.



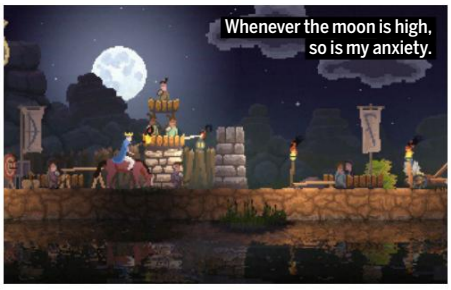

Imperial ships and supply crates will keep you well stocked.


The sky always looks lovely.




Villagers live in the forest. Toss 'em a coin and they're yours.




Whenever the moon is high, so is my anxiety.

BRUTAL STATE

KINGDOM is a Zen garden that will do its best to break you. *By James Davenport*

K*ingdom* is easy at first. My job is to assign peasants tasks as they stave off waves of monsters, and it's like working on a slow-moving assembly line. But then the conveyor belt speeds up and I stop recognising the machinery. Imps attack in numbers greater than my army of archers can handle, and phantasms appear and fly over my highest walls to chow on my builders. It's a merciless shift from Zen to ten that robs me of my peace of mind.

With every new game of *Kingdom*, you spawn as a king or queen atop a horse and canter along a forested 2D plane until you stumble upon a few loose coins. They can be spent on recruiting new villagers, tools, building fortifications, or on mysterious monoliths hidden in the forest. The first required purchase is a campfire. Throw a coin into the empty coin space hovering above it and you've kicked off your kingdom. You're prompted to give some wandering peasants a coin, then to drop a few more into bows and hammers. Your new followers will pick up whatever tool is nearest to them, provided they're not already equipped. And that's where *Kingdom* stops explaining anything.

Mystery and subtlety are central to *Kingdom*. Nothing is overtly communicated. Close scrutiny of otherwise simple aspects of the game (animation, musical cues, lighting) is vital to achieve the highest build efficiency. For example, I found that if I had tools ready for new villagers back at my hold, when I recruited them at their camps deep in the forest, they would scurry just a little bit faster than normal to join me.

The motive to pay attention didn't come without failure, and I failed a lot

But the motive to pay attention didn't come without failure, and I failed a lot. Monsters can attack from any side every night, and if they decimate your camp of supplies and coins, they'll go for your crown next, which means it's time to start over. In my first hour or so, I didn't mind. Failure was often the result of missing an obvious cue, mechanic, or because I just made a dumb mistake. But once I got a few hours of experience in and figured out how to build more efficiently, a single game could last upwards of 45 minutes. Lessons start to come in smaller doses or not at all. There's too much important mechanical depth hidden in *Kingdom*'s presentation to send the player back half an hour without teaching them something. Failing these long games tested me.

Luckily, the music went a long way to keeping me sane. A soft chiptune soundtrack rings in each morning with pleasant harmonics and pulls my patience out of the mud with a gentle tug or two. It serves as a lovely backdrop to a beautiful, mysterious world I desperately want to explore, which is why it's so painful to find the game such a grind. There were thrilling moments where an army of monsters were throwing themselves against my last defences and I barely managed to make it to morning – it just takes too long between failures to reach the point where I find opportunity to grow. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A minimalist management game with lots of secrets

EXPECT TO PAY
£7

DEVELOPER
Nolo, Licorice

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

REVIEWED ON
Win 7, i7 860, 8GB DDR3, GTX 760

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.rawfury.com/games/kingdom

PC GAMER VERDICT

Kingdom is a fun, gorgeous management game that quickly devolves into frustrating obscurity.

70

Future

A BRAND NEW PC GAMING EVENT

THE PC GAMER Weekender 2016

5 – 6 March

The Old Truman Brewery, London

TICKETS ARE £24 (INC. VAT) PER DAY



HARDWARE ZONE



GAMING ZONE



ESPORTS ZONE

→ www.pcgamer.com/weekender

GOAL DIGGER

FOOTBALL MANAGER 2016 unearths happy memories – but can it still truly call itself the beautiful game? *By Ben Wilson*

This legendary dugout sim has endured some polarising seasons. Critics say its modern form is too complex and sprawling. Fans argue it appears that way because it offers all the depth of being a real manager. Boo-boys decry its UI as impenetrable. Converts insist everything is to hand if you only know where to look. And in pretend football as in real life, forumite squabbling ultimately smothers any attempt at serious discussion.

The main interface is certainly overwhelming for new or lapsed players. Every screen is a spaghetti junction of words and digits and pie charts, constructed upon a foundation of assumed knowledge, from which all roads seem to reach dead ends. The only way for novices to bed-in is by initially palming off key tasks, such as training and scouting, to AI-controlled staff.

After mastering the menus, you see why ardent fans back 'their' game so lustily, and praise the deeper features that weren't there in the supposed golden years. Back then, transfers and matches were the big time-sink, now it's the tiny decisions that tax the grey matter and cause whole weekends to disappear. Do you start a star player returning from injury, despite your physio warning he'll only last 30 minutes? Do you bollock an underperforming full-back at half-time, or calmly reassure him he can turn it round?

While such handling of the minutiae of training-ground life is relatively new and impressive, SI has by no means lost track of what got it this far. Transfer negotiations are devilish fun. Agree a fee for a player and you're invited to sit down with his agent to negotiate not only a wage, but clauses such as promotion pay rises and even his fee for being an unused sub. At lower league clubs, penny pinching plays a vital role in your chances of long-term success.

Now it's the tiny decisions that cause whole weekends to disappear

Matchdays, too, are wonderfully elaborate, press conferences, team talks and intricate tactical options creating the sense that each is a unique occasion. There's no breezing through weeks of the season in an evening anymore. That might sound like a negative to anyone who's skipped a few editions, but it's not once comfortably embedded.

One small caveat: seven years since its introduction, the 3D engine still doesn't feel like a true representation of top-level football. At least once per game a player will do something completely absurd that shatters the illusion of reality.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest annual instalment of the best-selling sports management sim ever.

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Sports Interactive

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Core i5, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Competitive

LINK
www.football manager.com

NEW BLOOD

Returning players will be aware that many of the elements discussed so far were present in 2015. What's in *FM 2016* for them, then, other than updated squads? Firstly, the option to create your own avatar, in order to roam the touchlines of those 3D stadia. It's, er, awful. Even with four ways to amend your jawline and 13 separate nose sliders, it's impossible to make in-game-you look like anything other than a Stone Roses tribute-band reject.

Much better is the seamless integration of analysis tool Prozone. It enhances proceedings on both a superficial level – delivering reams of stats from elsewhere in the world via a loading-screen ticker – and at a hands-on one, enabling you to study any performance in surgical detail.

Yet the game still suffers from the absence of two innovations made by a contemporary. *Out of the Park Baseball* has long enabled users to both play classic leagues, and – crucially – carry over saves from one release to the next. For *FM* to keep up with its former stablemate – SI actually published it between 2005 and 2007 – it needs to introduce the latter option. *FM* is deeper and more detailed than ever, which only makes it extra galling that your 120-hour save game will be consigned to the Trash folder in 12 months' time. ■

ANATOMY OF A TOUCHSCREEN

FM's *more lightweight on-the-go mode*



1 FM TOUCH
Separate from the main game, streamlines advanced tactical and transfer options.

2 PREMIER LEAGUE BADGES
As with the full-fat game, these are fake. Get a third-party logo pack for the correct ones.

3 ACTIONS
Spend real money on game-changers such as feeding a team 'Dodgy Lasagne'. Hmmm.

4 PROZONE CONTENT
This is dialled down, with a focus on basic stats and tables, all in plain sight.

5 THE WEEKS WHIP BY
...but not as swiftly as with older versions. Download *CM 03/04* for free if speed is crucial.

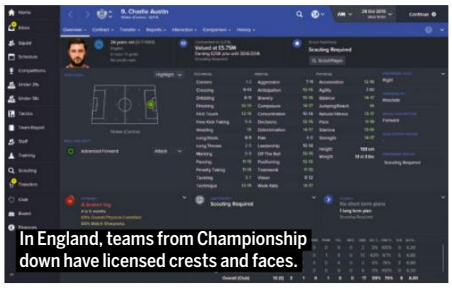
PC GAMER VERDICT

Still untouchable on the footy front – but shelf life and that inconsistent 3D engine chip away at its tender achilles.

83



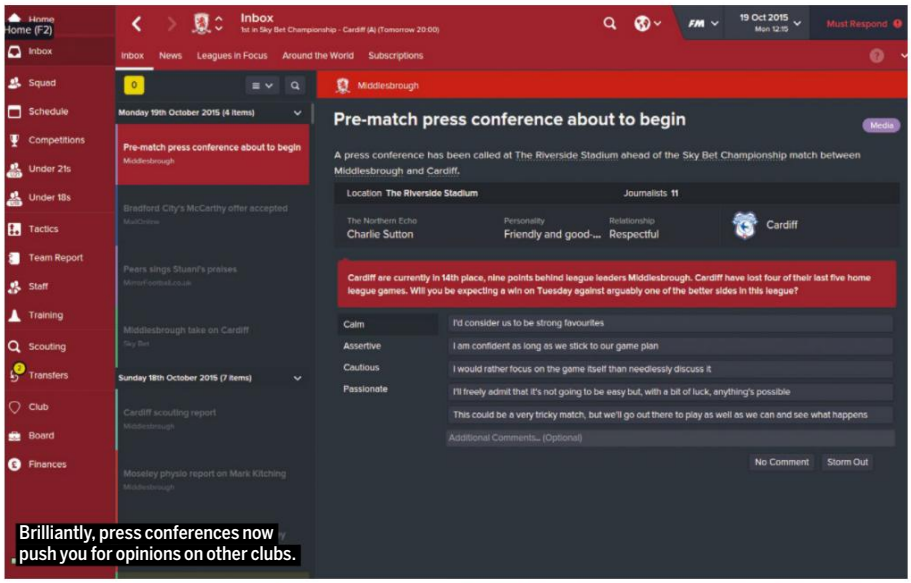
3D has its issues, but goals still feel great.



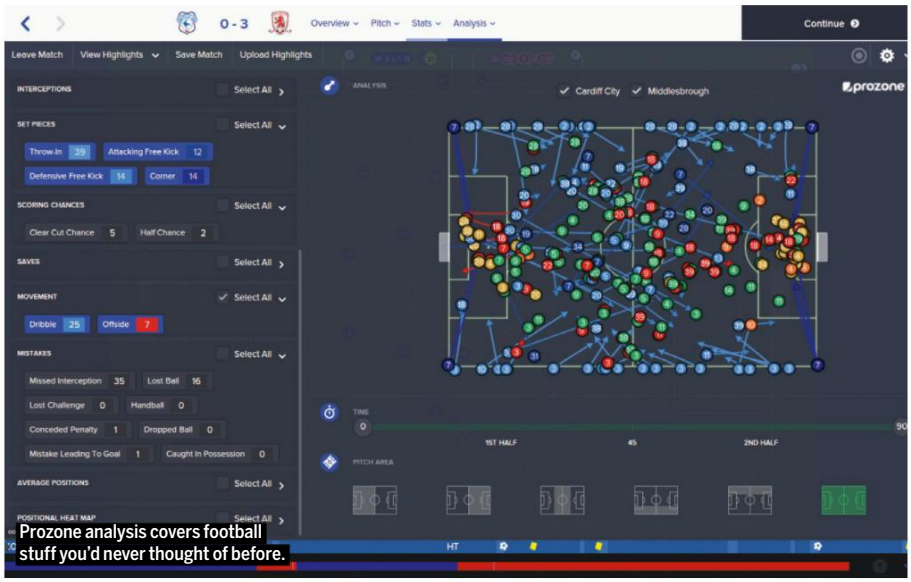
In England, teams from Championship down have licensed crests and faces.



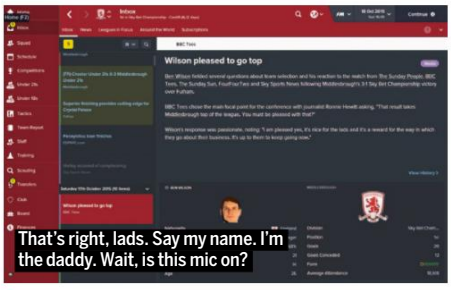
Really suffering with the 3D view? Try classic 2D instead.



Brilliantly, press conferences now push you for opinions on other clubs.



Prozone analysis covers football stuff you'd never thought of before.



That's right, lads. Say my name. I'm the daddy. Wait, is this mic on?



Avatar options rock. So long as you're Liam Gallagher.

SOREY IT TOOK SO LONG

TALES OF ZESTIRIA is a return to form for the series and feels right at home now that it's made it to PC. ***By Daniella Lucas***

The *Tales* series has been around for 20 years and is known for its heavy console ties, so it comes as a bit of a shock it's *finally* made it to PC with the release of *Tales of Zestiria*. A mostly traditional Japanese RPG, *Zestiria* follows hero Sorey – a human with the ability to see the powerful and magical Seraphim – in his bid to rid the world of evil Hellion beasts.

Like *Metal Gear Solid*, *Tales of Zestiria* is one of those stories where if you try to explain the complexities to a newcomer they'll start backing away in fear, but all of that talk of 'Prime Lords', 'Squires', and misappropriated names from Western fantasy legends will make perfect sense to you. Mostly, however, you'll spend your time exploring towns and dungeons, taking in a tale filled with melodrama, and smacking bad guys over the head with your sword in realtime battles.

It all gets off to quite a slow start, but the intro to this 40+ hour game is never dull. The opening area feels lush and vibrant despite it actually being quite technically sparse. The bright anime-style and gentle greens of the rolling hills are charming, soundtracked by a score with an infectious sense of adventure. If, like me, you played *Tales of Symphonia* on Gamecube, then the medieval fantasy vibe will instantly feel familiar. If you didn't, trust me, it's a good thing.

I found Sorey and his merry band of invisible friends very likeable despite their questionable taste in feathery earrings. The scripting and characterisation for each party member makes each one feel relatable and distinct. Edna the Earth Seraphim, for example, may look like your typical, sweet lolita anime trope, but she's actually sarcastic and deadpan. She delights in winding up the rest of your little troupe, and feels like a twisted version of Daria.

At some points you'll find yourself having to make some tough decisions, and while they don't really affect your progress they do feel as though they have consequences in the way they affect your team mentally. Early on you have to decide if you want to help fix a bridge using your powers in front of a large crowd. Do you risk them fearing you and your 'monstrous' abilities, or wait until they're gone and delay your journey in the process. There's not a lot of depth to it, but the characterisation is so well done that I couldn't help but feel emotionally connected to Sorey. I decided to be hasty to help the townsfolk faster, and felt an immediate pang of sadness as they all backed off in fear, leaving Sorey to stare glumly at his feet.

If you don't like JRPGs this won't be the game to change your mind

ARTE OF WAR

Unlike other JRPGs such as *Final Fantasy VII*, *Zestiria* uses action-based combat rather than traditional turn-based battles. It's surprisingly simple to get with grips with, as you use a combination of physical strikes and magical 'Artes'. While it can seem button-mashy at first, new elements such as Armatization add depth, letting you fuse with a Seraphim partner for increased damage.

Even the equipment system is full of strategic details to exploit. Instead of just swapping out cotton vests for stronger platemail and the like, you can fuse items together to receive special effects and bonuses. The shiny new amber tiara I picked up about five hours in didn't come close to trumping my regular ol' pound shop costume one, as I'd already fused it with more useful abilities.

Despite an engaging story during which I became increasingly attached to *Zestiria*'s young heroes, the adventure can feel a little clumsy in places. Being a port of a PS4 game, it's best played on a gamepad as some of the keyboard button-mapping feels awkward in combat, and the camera can get stuck at inconvenient angles if a fight breaks out near a wall. I also found myself having to awkwardly stand in just the right place to check a monument or trigger a conversation, and it can be hard to figure out where to go next. There's a star icon to signal important events, but it'll only appear if you're in the same map area, which isn't helpful if you need to be in a different zone entirely.

There are also a few points where 'traditional' crosses over into just being needlessly old-fashioned. You still need to make use of save points dotted around the countryside, but at least there's a quick-save feature for when you're really in a pinch. And while *Zestiria*'s dungeons are a huge improvement on previous series instalments (I actually explored things rather than just looking for that one stereotypical dead end that always has a treasure chest at the end of it) areas can still feel like fancy corridors that ferry you between plot points. However the game hides it all well, making up for its weak points by having such fantastic style, and the story is involving enough to forgive any minor discrepancies.

If you don't like JRPGs then this won't be the game to change your mind, but it's one of the best in the *Tales* series. Fans will love the vast improvements on previous entries, and the fact it shares a similar sense of spirit to that of the legendary *Tales of Symphonia* (also coming to PC, and free with *Zestiria* if you pre-ordered it). If you're into the genre but have never played a *Tales* game before then this is a great place to start. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A traditional Japanese RPG, and the 15th entry in the *Tales* series.

EXPECT TO PAY
£39.99

DEVELOPER
Bandai Namco

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
i5-3230 CPU, 8GM RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/351970/



PC GAMER VERDICT

It's got nothing on *FF* at its best, but it's still an excellent example of the genre and has some fun twists on RPG traditions.

82



Alisha may be a princess, but she's also a tough knight.




This is a crowded room by *Tales*'s standards.


Zestiria likes to 'borrow' from European legends. This is Ladylake.




Dungeons have wide corridors for ease of combat.

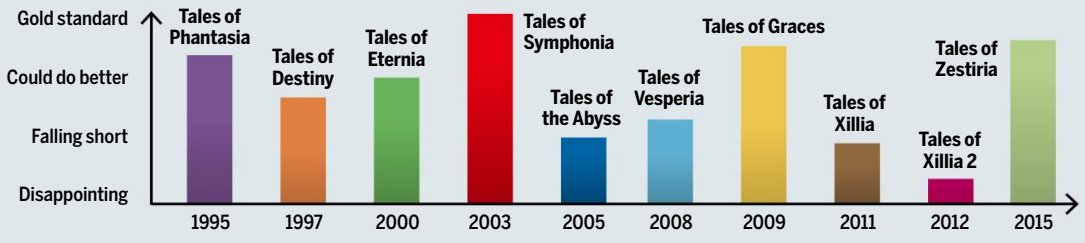

Most of the time you look like you're talking to yourself.


The towns may be empty, but they still feel alive.



TELLING A TALE

While *Zestiria* is the first *Tales* game to come to PC, it's the 15th in the series. Some have fared better than others. Here are the series' highs and lows.



SMALL STEPS

ANNO 2205 is a lean city builder that aims for the moon but is a little short of rocket boost to reach it. ***By Angus Morrison***

I'm a soft southern man with typist's hands. I grind my own coffee and I pronounce 'quinoa' not at all like it's spelled. You can understand my terror, then, upon discovering that the entirety of my nascent megacorp's all-male workforce was made up of Liverpudlians. They were polite enough when I stopped by to make sure I was meeting their basic needs, but simmering class war would surely impact the financials – I had to gentrify, and fast.

With a spate of promotions, I transformed my Liverpudlian Workers into female Operators. That's aspiration for you. Too soon, however, I'd feel the consequences of my scorn for the working classes: *Anno 2205*'s bourgeoisie are insufferable, hardly moving in before demanding fresh fruit, vitamin drinks and, yes, organic rice. This is standard fare for the city-building series. It's a balancing act involving cash flow, infrastructure and the increasingly unreasonable desires of your citizens. There's a faint caring for the planet moral about the whole thing although history seems on-course to repeat itself given your inhabitants' incredible propensity to consume. Cybernetics are all the rage in the temperate islands that remain after the world's sea-level rise in *Anno 2070*, while the hipsters on the moon want Rejuvenators.

Ah yes: the moon. *Anno 2205* pits you against various NPC corporations in a race to colonise the moon and extract its delicious helium-3 with the long-term goal of building a fusion reactor. Supply lines must be established and maintained as a matter of priority, factoring the shipping costs into your budget. Like all city builders it's an optimisation challenge but, on standard difficulty where money flows and workers are eager to serve, not a tough one. The Lunar Licensing Program is a step-by-step guide through the campaign that sits in your mission log alongside other 'quests' doled out by your competitors. It tells you what to build and when, leaving you to plug the funding gaps on your own initiative.

You lay down some dwellings and witness the havoc they wreak

You have to be reactive rather than proactive in *Anno* games. Strategy doesn't come into it: you lay down some dwellings and witness the havoc they wreak upon commodity levels before improving those facilities to restore balance. Anyone coming in from *Cities: Skylines* will find it minimalistic, allowing you to expand just about anywhere with a road without regard for zoning and correct mistakes as you make them.

Once Modules are introduced, penalty-free relocation becomes an enormous benefit. No longer do you have to build two whole factories to do a job one slightly larger factory could accomplish. It's cheaper and more efficient to expand an existing factory, which necessitates shunting a lot of stuff out of the way, particularly on the Arctic maps, where residences have to cluster around industry for heat. Lunar maps dictate that shield generators be established first to stop meteors making holes in rooftops. These subtle variations are a pleasant change of pace from the lawless sprawl of the temperate regions.

There's a sub-plot to *Anno*'s typically insipid RTS-lite elements in which you pilot a fleet of battleships around ice floes and islands blowing up moon terrorists and completing fetch quests for fellow CEOs. These are optional distractions for additional resources – you can also progress by expanding your cities.

GOOD LOOKING

Anno 2205 does look gorgeous. This is a city builder that can easily tax your rig rendering for a level of detail that has no value in itself but still made me smile when I realised that people on the moon do hop instead of walk. But I recommend installing *Anno 2205* to an SSD if you've got the option. Lengthy loading times between your corporate overview and each individual region put me off popping between maps as often as the game seemed to want me to.

This is the most streamlined, straightforward *Anno* yet. It's pacier and much more forgiving than any other city builder, which makes it a great introduction to the genre. The balancing act lacks depth, however, and coupled with the lacklustre RTS component, it's hard to see what a *Cities: Skylines* veteran would get out of *Anno 2205*'s gentle coaching. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A futuristic city builder and RTS-lite.

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Blue Byte

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-3570K, 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 780Ti

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
anno-game.ubi.com/anno-2205

WAGE SLAVES *We can't all be CEO*



WORKERS
Your basic factory grunts and, after the initial shock of that accent, my favourite underlings. They want water, food and access to information, none of which you have to fly in from the Arctic.



OPERATORS
I'd ship them all back to Shoreditch were Shoreditch not underwater these days. Blending a desire for organic food with a lust for cybernetics, hipsters are the first test of your management skills.



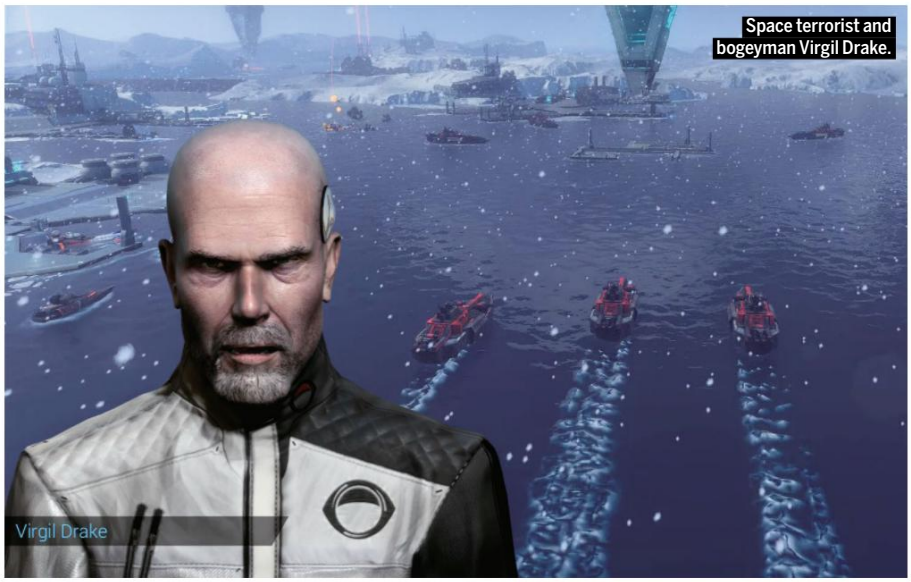
EXECUTIVES
Execs want skyscrapers and luxury produce. How very predictable. Still, I can make luxury food without having to go through a tedious loading screen, so they're definitely alright by me.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An ideal gateway into the city management sim, but with too little room for forward-planning for city-builder regulars.

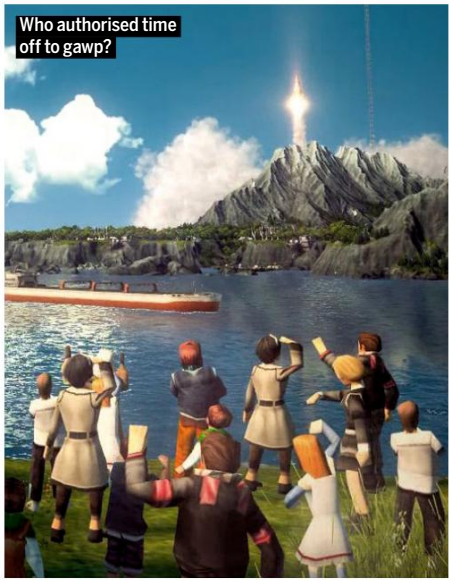
73

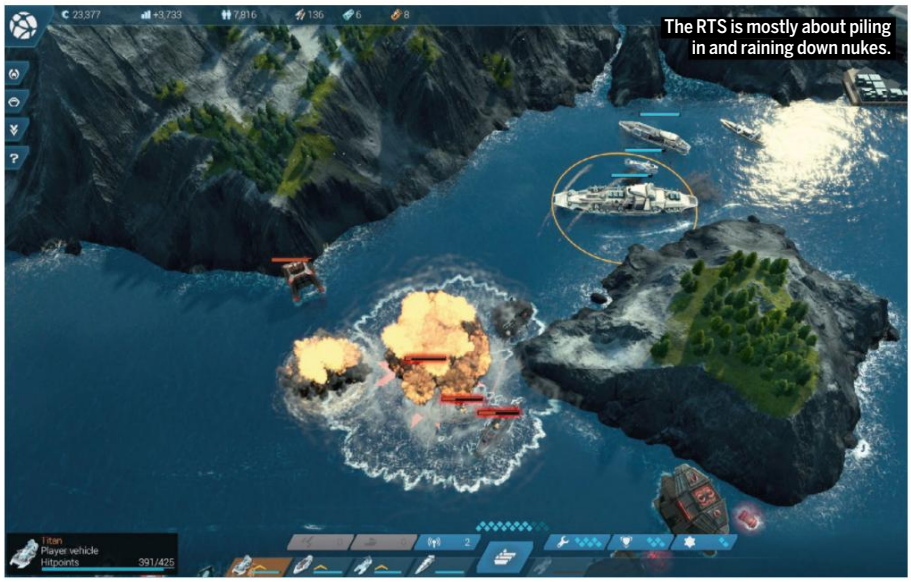

Organic rice and sunflower oil. What have I become?


Space terrorist and bogeyman Virgil Drake.
Virgil Drake

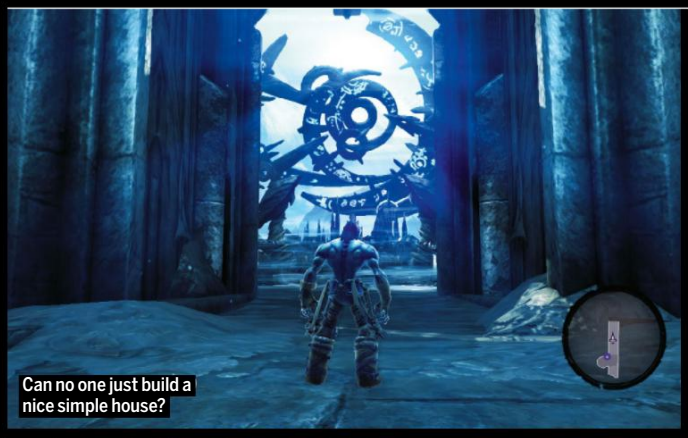

Molybdenum is your reward for strip-mining the Arctic.




Who authorised time off to gawp?


The RTS is mostly about piling in and raining down nukes.

RE-RELEASES REVIEWED by Jon Blyth



Can no one just build a nice simple house?





I prefer the jolly fat man stereotype.





Fighting – it isn't brilliant, but good enough.

U HOARSE, MAN?

Gravelly voice-acting throughout, in DARKSIDERS 2: DEATHINITIVE EDITION

The other three horsemen must be well jealous of Death. War, Famine and Pestilence are basically just feeders for Death. "Thanks for all that War, brother," Death would chuckle, patting his stomach. "I can't wait for all the soldiers to die, right into my mouth. Om nom nom. Soldiery." So it's something of a surprise that Death, as the infinitely patient end of all things, the one truth we all share, is a bit of a snarky cow.

Darksiders 2 is amusing, and gently camp. And yes, 'amusing' is faint praise for comedy. But I wasn't expecting any laughs on this apocalyptic journey of brotherly redemption, so my wry smirk was a welcome bonus. Especially when every aspect of *Darksiders* is so profoundly familiar. It's a Frankenstein of wall-running traversal, combo-combat, collectibles, skill trees, exotic fantasy landscapes and machinery, and block-pushing puzzles. But this Frankenstein is so comfortable that the villagers would chuck away their torches, and invite it in to play with the kids. Which sounds like a criticism, but that depends where you're coming from. Who doesn't like comfort?

The combat is more challenging than it feels at first, forcing you to up your dodge roll game as you notice health potions becoming more scarce. For a parkour athlete, Death doesn't have the vertical range of, say, *DmC* – there are unlockable moves for launching and slamming, but his jump is minuscule next to the oversized enemies. The puzzles are nothing you haven't seen, either – the main innovation being spherical blocks. But wallowing in familiarity is pleasant, especially when the details have been tweaked enough to let you pretend you're doing something new.

You get the feeling you're breezing past an art team's hard work

The scale is striking. Not the length of the game, although that's enough to suck up a full 24 hours of uninterrupted play. It's the levels. Large areas are bolted through on a horse, and Death is a superhuman acrobat. Lara clamps her thighs around a column and shuffles gruntily around it, like it's not even supposed to resemble my long-term fantasy of getting lost in a giant's trousers. But Death sprints along walls and up pillars faster than he runs on the ground, and the rooms expand to take that speed into account. You get the haunting feeling that you're breezing past an art team's hard work. Several times, I stopped and looked around, just out of respect. It's generally worth it.

This is where you'll get your deeper satisfaction: the plot may be dressing up waypoints with nonsense, but the mythology of the world is just plain fun, and the characters are as bold and appealing as they are ridiculous and camp. One performance caveat, though: I've read some people complaining about performance issues. Personally I got superbly smooth performance on a five-year-old PC, with screen tearing that only appeared in cutscenes. Just use a gamepad, or be prepared to remap the finger-Twister defaults. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Epic action adventure etc. You know the kinda thing.

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Gunfire / Vigil / Nordic Games

PUBLISHER
Nordic Games

MULTIPLAYER
None

FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 245, 77%

LINK
www.bit.ly/1Ypbbzp

PC GAMER VERDICT

Prime action-adventure, and unlike some of the works opposite, no one will ever get pissy about whether it's a game.

81

POSITIVE OUTLOOK

The compelling text adventuring of ANALOGUE: A HATE STORY

The writing of Christine Love has, until now, passed me by. Perhaps because her surname is Love, and I am a man. If her name had been something more appealing to my masculine soul – something like JJ Robust or Penelope Infrastructure, maybe I'd have come to it earlier. I just came here for the word Hate, because I wanted to kill something.

But no: the object of the game here is to discover the fate of a group of people, based on the unlockable emails of a small number of their noblefolk. Your interaction with the world involves three things: reading emails, presenting emails to (eventually) two AI characters to unlock more emails, and listening to the AIs paint their own prejudiced pictures of the world. From these three things, a tale of subjective tragedy steadily unfolds. And it unfolds in a way that implants itself into the 'give-a-shit' centres of your brain using impressively few words.

Love's writing is simple, and so effective that you begin very quickly to picture and care about the Pale Bride, even without the unsubtle cajoling of your first AI companion. It's a combination of the smart, tight writing, and the fact that more text is the game's only real reward: you begin to hunger for more story, more personality. And just to sate the gamer's need for urgency and puzzles, there's a brief burst of action towards the end. Bullet dodged there, Love. The last thing you want is people on the internet telling you your game isn't really a game. ■

85

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A futuristic email client with two expositional Clippies.

EXPECT TO PAY
£7

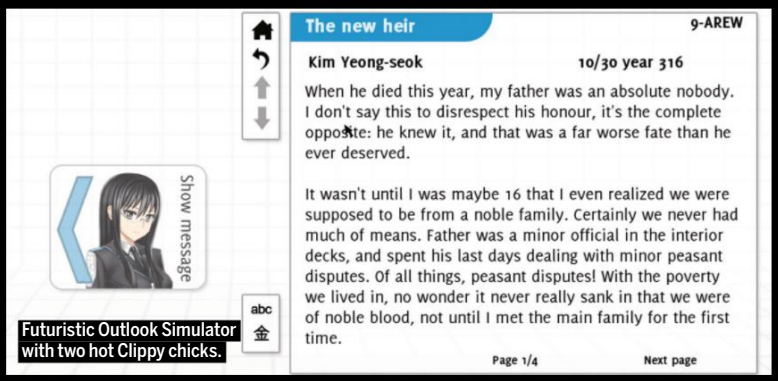
DEVELOPER
Christine Love

PUBLISHER
Self-published

MULTIPLAYER
None

FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 238, 76%

LINK
www.ahatestory.com



Futuristic Outlook Simulator with two hot Clippy chicks.


I got stuck here for ages.

PATHOLOGIC CLASSIC HD

While they're working on the remake of this beloved curiosity, here's the oxymoronic Classic HD version. The reworked translation will be of most immediate interest for fans. I've always enjoyed bad German translations in mid-budget RPGs, because the literal translations of unfamiliar idioms always added to the otherworldliness. But the same synergy doesn't exist with bad Russian translations and survival horror. This new game works: the bizarreness now feels deliberate, and you feel more confident, enjoying the damaged, dangerous and distressing atmosphere. ■

79


Let's canter and banter.

ASSASSIN'S CREED III

This is as good a time as any to apologise for over-scoring this when it came out on Xbox 360. Truth is, I was delirious after being forced to play it for three days solid in a tiny hotel room, and impressed by the final act, in which the most articulate pro-Templar arguments were tossed about. In retrospect, it relied a little too heavily on our hero being a whining, ineloquent idiot. Still, there was nuance in the plot that can often feel lacking in *AC*. It's just a shame the game itself was such a gigantic rehash of mission clichés that had, even then, become so routine that even taking the piss seems like its own cliché. ■

62


Less sex, more violins.

THE DEVIL ON G-STRING

I like being outraged and sneering at foreign attitudes to sex, so this was something of a letdown. G-string refers to the part of the violin, not the sexy guiche garotte. And the most explicit sexy scenes have been tastefully faded away, leaving us furious prudes with just salacious camera angles for anger. What remains is a properly localised and profoundly non-Western mystery thriller visual novel (with voice acting, for an extra few quid) with a brilliant remixed classical soundtrack. ■

77

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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



102

GROUP TEST

Looking for a new gaming mouse to give you the edge? We review seven of the sleekest and sexiest.



108

REVIEWS

Find out if Steam Link is the best way to stream games, in this month's grab-bag of PC-related hardware.



Just so you're clear: the Roccat Nyth can't actually balance on its nose.



110

BUYER'S GUIDE

Want to build a PC from scratch, or just upgrade a single component? Our guide has you covered.

[UPGRADE]

GROUP TEST

By Dave James



GAMING MICE

Find the ideal gaming rodent to fit your grip

Last month I checked out keyboards and now we're looking at their companion, the mouse. The perfect mouse is a personal choice, based on how it moulds to your hand and grip style. But we can still judge mice based on sensor performance, software, build quality and ergonomics.



Q&A

What are the objective factors?
Build quality, sensitivity and accuracy are the main points for a gaming mouse. You want the device to feel sturdy, but a lighter mouse is better. You also want it to fit your particular type of grip. Then you want the sensor to be reliable and deliver a consistent translation of your mouse's movements in-game.

How do I know my grip?
If you favour the palm grip your hand will rest fully on top of your mouse, with your index and second fingers lying flat on the two main buttons. Movements will mostly come from your elbow. This favours a larger, weightier mouse. If you use a claw grip only the tips of your fingers are in contact with the mouse and movements are mainly controlled from the wrist and by your thumb, third and little fingers. This grip best suits smaller, sensitive mice.

Do I want a laser mouse or an optical sensor?
Both types of sensor have their place. The laser sensor is less picky about its surface while an optical mouse might struggle without a mouse mat. But while a laser mouse uses hardware acceleration to track its high DPI settings, the optical doesn't, which can make it more consistent in translating its movement.

Wired or wireless?
Lag is no longer the issue it was with older wireless mice but you still have to cope with the vagaries of battery life. With a good wired mouse your only worry is a potentially awkward trailing cable.

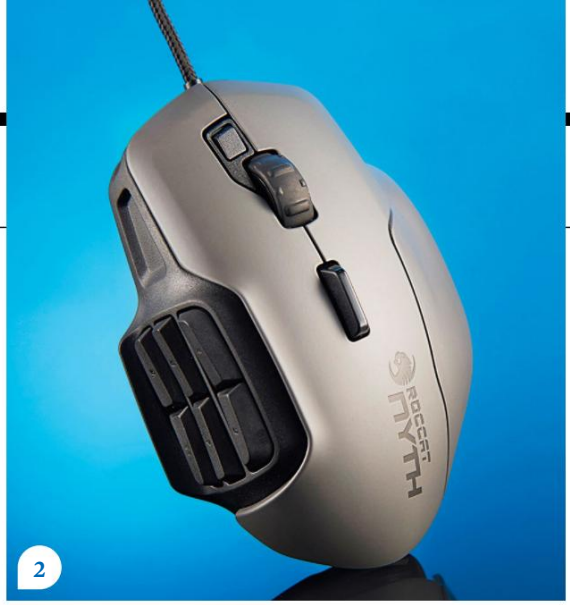
Dictionary

DPI – How many steps a mouse reports for every inch it travels. The higher the DPI setting the more accurately it reports the smallest of movements.

Polling rate/response rate – The number of times the PC will query the mouse to determine where the sensor says it should be, usually measured in Hertz (Hz).

>>







RAZER MAMBA

www.razerzone.com **£130**

→ The latest Mamba has the tagline of 'the world's most advanced gaming mouse' and, while I'm not normally swayed by such marketing hyperbole, Razer might actually be onto something this time.

1

Mind you it said pretty much the same about the last wireless iteration of the Mamba and that was one ropey old rodent. Battery life was measured in minutes, lag was sometimes an issue and it was just generally uncomfortable to use. Those issues have been remedied, though it's still a heavy mouse.

The super-expensive wireless Mamba shares the same DNA with the Tournament Edition version, which is a good thing. It shares the same sleek, comfortable design, similar to (but not as perfect as) the Deathadder, and carries an excellent new Philips laser sensor. It's incredibly accurate and beautifully smooth, even at the higher DPI settings you need to swing across a 4K desktop resolution.

What's new is the impressively responsive wireless connection and the adjustable click-force of the two main buttons, which FPS and MOBA players will appreciate. Razer's crafted one of the most competitive wireless mice around, but at a price that will leave your wallet crying for mercy.

81%

ROCCAT NYTH

www.roccat.org **£90**

→ The Roccat Nyth is one of those classic button-festooned mice beloved of MOBA and MMO players the world over. But can Roccat's design top the Razer Naga, which has been many a gamer's weapon of choice?

2

I'm going to say yes. And I'm saying that because this is the first of that style of mouse I've come across that I could happily use on a day-to-day basis and on games that aren't demanding more buttons than I have digits.

It's far more suitable for the palm grip with its weighty design and chunky body. But wait! It's got a bit of a trick up its sleeve in the shape of incredibly simple, genuinely cool customisation. Strong magnets on the side allow you to switch different pinky grips, which essentially change the whole feel of the device.

There's more customisation on the left side where the Nyth can hold up to a dozen buttons. That space can be altered to suit your needs, a dozen tiny buttons, double-length buttons, and blank spacers can be mixed and matched. They all feel nice and clicky and the software experience makes custom layouts easy to assign. This is the best implementation of an MMO mouse I've seen yet.

85%



4

CORSAIR SABRE RGB LASER

www.corsair.com **£45**

→ Corsair has a great history of gaming peripherals, which is especially surprising given it hasn't been at it for very long. Its keyboards are some of the finest, but can the new Sabre mouse keep up that tradition?

3

When I first saw pictures of the Sabre (available in both RGB form with either optical or laser sensors) it immediately brought to mind thoughts of my beloved Logitech G9 mouse, a device whose rebirth I've been jonesing for. The Sabre is relatively short and compact, and most definitely one for the claw-grip gamer.

It's also seriously light, giving it the same feel as the Tournament Edition mice we've seen from both Razer and MadCatz. The Avago ADNS 9800 laser sensor gives it slick, responsive motion during gaming, and it's impressively smooth too. In fact, it's almost up there with the mighty Philips sensor in the new Mamba.

What I'm not sold on are the ergonomics. While the Sabre does feel like a claw-grip mouse, there's also something about it that meant I was holding it slightly off-centre to make it comfortable. For normal use that's fine, but sniping in *BF4* felt inaccurate as I was sweeping the barrel across the battlefield.

77%

SPEEDLINK KUDOS K-9

www.speedlink.com **£36**

→ Not normally a name you might associate with performance gaming peripherals, Speedlink is pushing a bit harder these days. The Torid gamepad was anything but, and the Kudos looks to have its place too.

4

The Kudos K-9 is the only mouse in this test that has an offset sensor. All the others have it placed directly in the centre, while the K-9 has it off to the right almost underneath the LMB. It's a feature that's always kept me going back to the excellent Shogun Bros Ballista Mk1, as it's almost like putting the cursor where your index finger is pointing.

The Kudos also feels like it's been designed specifically for my hand, though still manages to cater for both prevalent types of mouse grip. Well, so long as you don't have either monstrously large or Tom Thumb hands. It's also the same weight as the Corsair Sabre RGB Laser and packs the same sensor too, which all means it's just as swift to throw across your desktop, but has a more comfortable feel to it. I also appreciate the sensitivity indicators on the back, displaying which of the four DPI steps you're currently operating in.

I never thought I'd be recommending a Speedlink mouse over a Corsair one, but that's what's just happened.

79%



STEELSERIES RIVAL 100

www.steelseries.com **£36**

→ Where do you stand in the laser vs optical sensor debate? SteelSeries seems firmly of the belief that the pros want optical, and with the Rival 100 the manufacturer is looking to create the most accurate, streamlined rodent around.

5

With direct 1:1 tracking and none of the hardware acceleration needed on laser gaming mice, the optical sensor is seen as the most accurate mouse device, but because of its reliance on a decent gaming surface you'll see far more laser mice around. As exemplified by this issue's test.

The SteelSeries Rival 100 is a powerful mouse, however, with an impressively low price point and simple design aesthetic. It's almost ambidextrous too, with only the left-sided thumb buttons spoiling things for the lefties.

The custom Pixart optical sensor is wonderfully smooth in-game, but does require greater movement on high-resolution screens because of its relatively low DPI settings. On a 4K desktop playing *FM 2016* or *DoTA* it's a bit of a mission, but in an FPS the accuracy of its movement is a very handy weapon upgrade.

It might be a little basic for some, but for the ultra-serious FPS player the Rival 100 is exactly what you need.

80%

COOLER MASTER XORNET II

www.coolermaster.com **£20**

→ Where some gaming mice try to please all-comers, Cooler Master has gone directly for a niche. The Xornet II is aimed only at claw-grip gamers, and then only those wanting an optical mouse for their paws.

6

To that end it's the absolute smallest mouse in the test, with the chassis running the length of your fingers, giving your palm absolutely nowhere to rest. This is a one-grip-only deal. But for that niche it fits pretty well, giving support for your right hand's ring finger and offering grips for your thumb and little finger to shift the mouse about.

Given the low price it's no surprise that this is a basic mouse in terms of the feature set. There is, of course, the obligatory multicoloured LED, offering 16.8m colours for your scroll wheel, which can have three different profile colours attached to indicate which of the configurable DPI settings you're on, but that's pretty much it.

It is classic optical gaming mouse fare. On a decent gaming surface the movement translation is accurate, responsive and smooth, and when you're in the midst of a tense firefight you can trust it to be consistent. It's basic and claw-exclusive, but also insanely cheap for such a trustworthy gaming gadget.

77%





LOGITECH G502 PROTEUS CORE

www.logitech.com **£60**

Once the most advanced gaming mouse in the world, can Logitech's G502 Proteus Core still cut the mustard against the might of Razer et al? On the basis of its glorious infinite scroll wheel alone it just might.

7

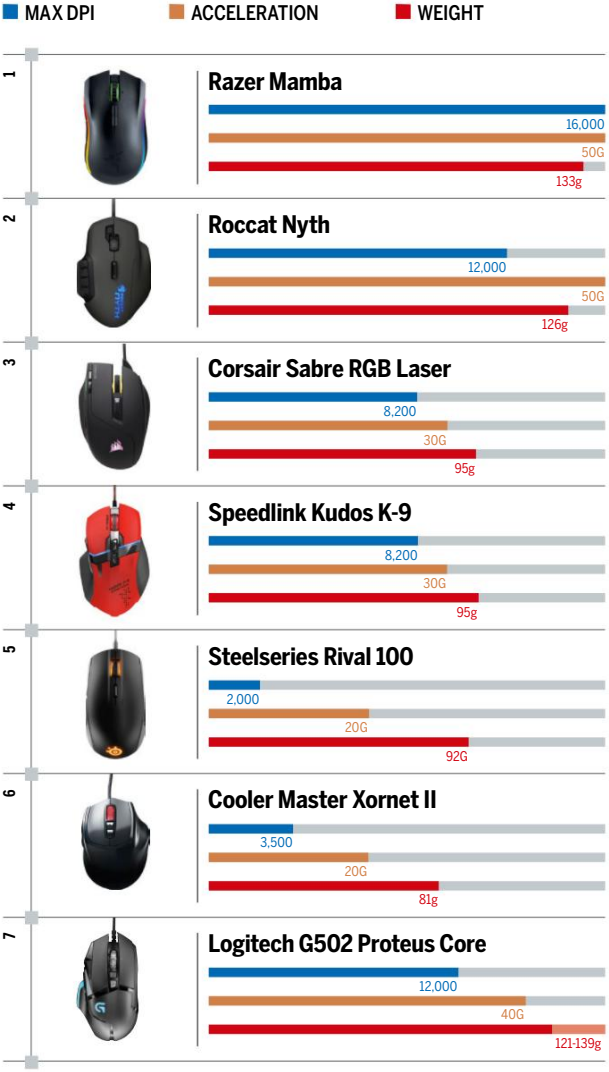
Like both the Razer Mamba and the Roccat Nyth, the G502 sports an insanely-high potential DPI setting. In fact it was the first to take the step up beyond the then-standard 8,200 maximum. But one of the most impressive things about it is the fact it never shoved that down your throat, and it performs just as well at its maximum 12,000 DPI as it does lower sensitivities.

That super-sensitive sensor means that at lower settings it's operating well within its capabilities which in turn means it stays sharp, consistent and accurate in-game. The same is true with the Philips sensors in the other two top-end mice, but the G502 adds a host of programmable buttons, too.

It's also seriously comfortable for either claw or palm grips, with that extra length supporting the hand. And it's the only one in this test to offer different weights, though out of the box it's a very heavy mouse. In short, the G502 has definitely still got it, though you'll need a big paw to really take advantage of it.

88%

STACKED UP



ESSENTIALS

	Sensor type	Polling rate	Programmable buttons	Connection
1	Laser	1,000Hz	9	Wireless or wired
2	Laser	1,000Hz	18	Wired
3	Laser	1,000Hz	8	Wired
4	Laser	1,000Hz	8	Wired
5	Optical	1,000Hz	6	Wired
6	Optical	1,000Hz	7	Wired
7	Laser	1,000Hz	11	Wired

REVIEWS

The very best in gaming hardware, reviewed



1 CONTROL YOURSELF
Via Steam's Big Picture Mode, where the Steam Controller feels most at home, you can alter the configurations based on user or developer recommendations as well as your own choice.

2 NO SECOND STICK
The trackpad feels far more digital than analog when it comes to games such as *Witcher 3* and *GTAV*. Looking around is simply not as intuitive or precise.

3 THUMB-TIED
The placement of the analog stick and buttons means you'll find your thumbs bumping together if you need to push right and hit X at the same time.

4 PADDLES
On the rear of the Steam Controller are a pair of paddle switches, which work great for games like *Dirt Rally*, though again feel hollow and overly plastic.

STEAM CONTROLLER

store.steampowered.com **£40**

GAME PAD

→ The Steam Controller is something Valve has been working on for many years now, and we've finally got a publicly available release version. But has Valve now created the perfect PC gamepad?

I first got my hands on a prototype Steam Controller at CES a good few years ago, and was impressed by the start Valve had made with the hardware, though concerned about how usable it would be on a day-to-day basis. This final release isn't a million miles away from that first hands-on controller, but my initial concerns still remain.

For a start it feels massive. I mean original Xbox controller massive. It also still feels like beta hardware, like a prototype taken straight from the manufacturer's factory floor. There's a decent heft to the parts that sit in your palm, giving it a nice balanced feel, but under the trackpads and the shoulder/trigger buttons it feels empty and the plastic echoey. There's little of the quality feel you get from either DualShock 4 or Xbox One controllers.

It also feels like it's been made differently from those two classic designs for the sake of being alternative. But I do like the trackpads – in Windows they're immediately responsive (though feel gritty with the tactile, haptic feedback) and they allow you to use the Steam Controller with games you couldn't use a traditional controller with. But I miss the second analog stick and, because it's emulating mouse and keyboard inputs, some games don't recognise it as a joypad.

72%

CONNECTION: WIRED OR WIRELESS / **RANGE:** 5M / **BATTERY LIFE:** 80HR (2X AA) / **TRACKPADS:** 2 / **ANALOG STICK:** 1 / **BUTTONS:** 16



STEAM LINK

store.steampowered.com **£40**

STREAMING BOX

→ At just £40 the Steam Link could be the perfect way to get your PC games into your living room and onto your big-screen HD TV. Though there is fierce competition in this increasingly packed market.

It's impressively easy to set up – plug into your TV, home network and controller and, with your Steam account running on your PC, it pairs in a trice. From there Big Picture Mode boots and you have access to any game you add to your library.

But, due to the relatively low-end hardware inside, there's a fair amount of input lag, making arcade gaming frustrating. It's improved if you go for a wired controller, decreasing the wireless input lag. More sedate titles are fine and the image quality remains high, even on the quickest of its setting modes. But for most of the games I'd want to play on my big TV the Steam Link doesn't feel powerful enough to deliver the robust low latency needed.

67%

OUTPUT: UP TO 1080P/60HZ / **NETWORKING:** 100MB ETHERNET, 802.11AC WIFI / **USB PORTS:** 3X USB 2.0 / **VIDEO:** HDMI OUT



RAZER DEATHSTALKER CHROMA

www.razerzone.com **£90**

KEYBOARD

→ Since the inception of LEDs, gaming companies have been desperate to jam them onto their peripherals. And now you can get millions of colours, not just single-shade deals – today it's all about the Chroma.

Thanks to its slimline form factor and chiclet keys the Chroma does have a striking look. For the most part it's very similar to the Deathstalker Ultimate in its general keyboardiness, but lacks the expensive touchscreen panel instead of the numpad. That's not a massive loss, but given the other trend in peripherals is towards mechanical switches, the short, dead action on the membrane switches makes it rather unpleasant to use. I've noticed a lot of errant double-strikes too.

It all feels very lightweight, and those chiclet keys feel rattly in their housing. For £90, you want a keyboard that feels more robust.

75%

SWITCHES: MEMBRANE / **ROLLOVER:** 10-KEY / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000HZ / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** INTEGRATED

ROUND-UP



BERYLLIUM KEYBOARD

Element Gaming **£60**

→ This mech-switch board is almost a carbon copy of the Corsair K70. The brushed metal base, the scrolling volume control and the lighting are all there. But without Cherry MX switches and with keys too tightly packed it's definitely the budget option.

www.elementgaming.com

79%



ATOMIC ITX

Element Gaming **£40**

→ This budget mini-ITX chassis isn't the sort you'll be able to pack with full-scale components – you really need an SFX-standard power supply to fit in even a short discrete graphics card – but the smooth curves, decent finish and smoked-glass side panels belie its price.

www.elementgaming.com

82%



LOGITECH G290

Logitech **£250**

→ The G290 is mechanically identical to the G29 I checked out in PCG285, except this time around it's more understated. The main difference is this layout uses the Xbox buttons, which makes sense if you're plugging it into a PC. That said you're missing the rev-indicator and a few of the extra buttons of the G29. Still, it's an awesome wheel and pedal setup, if pricey.

www.logitech.com

86%

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.



BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL £744

MOTHERBOARD



H81M-P33
MSI **£34**
A bargain-priced microATX board that pairs nicely with the Pentium G3258, letting you overclock into 4GHz+ territory.

PROCESSOR



Pentium Anniversary G3258
Intel **£48**
Ludicrously cheap and overclockable, the dual-core G3258 rivals far more expensive processors in gaming performance.

GRAPHICS CARD



AMD R9 380 2GB
Sapphire **£159**
AMD's R9 380 is a refreshed R9 285, but it still packs enough power to handle 1080p gaming at a decent price.

COOLER



Hyper 212 EVO
Cooler Master **£25**
A legendary cooler, still the best for its very reasonable price. Overclock to your heart's content with this.

MEMORY



Crucial Ballistix Sport 1600MHz (8GB)
Crucial **£40**
Cheap, low-profile, and reliable. Does its job. The best 8GB you'll find.

POWER SUPPLY



EVGA 500W 80PLUS Certified ATX12V/EPS12V
EVGA **£33**
A reliable PSU with enough juice to run your CPU and a reasonably power-hungry GPU.

SSD



BX100 250GB
Crucial **£67**
Thinking about skimping and going HDD-only? Don't. The BX100 is much faster and a fantastic performer for the price.

CASE



Carbide 200R
Corsair **£50**
The 200R gets the job done with toolless trays and plenty of space. ATX-sized, so you can upgrade that microATX board later.

DISPLAY



VX2263SMHL
Viewsonic **£118**
An affordable 1080p monitor with vibrant IPS image quality and low response times. A real bargain.

KEYBOARD



CM Storm QuickFire Rapid
Coolermaster **£83**
A no-frills mechanical keyboard with a standard layout and Cherry switches. We recommend Browns or Reds for gaming.

MOUSE



G303 Daedalus Apex
Logitech **£50**
The best gaming mouse sensor in existence paired with buttons with extremely low click distance. Especially ideal for MOBA players.

HEADSET



HyperX Cloud
Kingston **£50**
Our favourite gaming headset, and it happens to be as cheap as plenty of inferior cans. A good buy for any gaming rig.

JOYSTICK



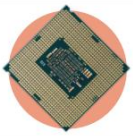
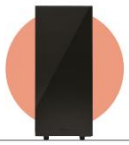
Xbox 360 Wired Controller
Microsoft **£21**
Now available at a sane price, the standard 360 controller feels great and functions perfectly on PC.



MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL £1384

MOTHERBOARD		**Z170 Pro Gaming** Asus **£120** The latest revision of our favourite gaming motherboard, with an M.2 PCIe x4 slot, Intel network port, USB 3.1 and SLI support.
PROCESSOR		**i5-6600K** Intel **£156** Intel's new Skylake processor is nearly as fast as an i7 for gaming. Comes with some important memory/storage speed boosts.
GRAPHICS CARD		**GTX 970 4G** MSI **£270** Offers the best price/performance ratio right now, and MSI's model is cheap and overclockable, with a quiet cooler.
COOLER		**Hyper 212 EVO** Cooler Master **£25** If it ain't broke... the Hyper 212 EVO is a great cooler for the price. Save a bit of money in your mid-range build.
MEMORY		**Ballistix Sport(8GB)** Crucial **£90** 8GB of reasonably fast DDR4, and one of the cheapest deals you'll find. Corsair is reliable, and the RAM's overclockable to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		**CX600M** Corsair **£61** 80Plus Bronze efficient, with enough power for a good gaming PC. Modular design is a great perk that cuts down on cable tangles.
SSD		**850 EVO 250GB** Samsung **£75** Samsung retains its top spot on the SSD pile with the fantastically priced, very speedy 850 EVO. Still the best price/performance.
CASE		**S340** NZXT **£57** The stylish S340 has some nice touches, such as removable dust filters and space for huge liquid cooling radiators.
DISPLAY		**G257HU** Acer **£282** A step up from 1080p to 1440p territory, with a vibrant IPS display and good response times at a strong price.
KEYBOARD		**K70 Vengeance** Corsair **£101** A great, full-size mechanical keyboard with an ergonomic wrist rest. We recommend Cherry Brown or Red switches for gaming.
MOUSE		**Deathadder 2013** Razer **£59** There's not a huge range of price differences on the best mice, so stick with the best for your mid-range build too.
HEADSET		**HyperX Cloud** Kingston **£50** Even for our medium build, we still recommend this decently-priced headset. There's nothing better for the money.
JOYSTICK		**Dualshock 4** Sony **£38** Requires unofficial software tools to get working, but it's so comfortable to hold and comes with lovely face buttons.



ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL £2442

MOTHERBOARD		**ROG Maximus VIII Hero** Asus **£172** Fantastic overclocking and stability, with a great UEFI BIOS from Asus. M.2, USB 3.1 and on-board power, reset, CMOS, etc, buttons.
PROCESSOR		**Core i7-6700K** Intel **£263** Intel's new top-of-the-line Skylake processor. Its new chipset includes important memory/ storage speed boosts.
GRAPHICS CARD		**GTX 980 Gaming 4G** MSI **£415** Right now the GTX 980 is the best value single-GPU card for ultra 1080p and 1440p gaming, bar none.
COOLER		**H90** Corsair **£75** Quiet even under heavy load, the H90 gets the cooling job done with a single 140mm radiator, easily fitting a variety of cases.
MEMORY		**Ripjaws V Series DDR4 2666 16GB** G.SKILL **£116** 16GB of fast DDR4. RAM speeds make only a small difference, but the 2666 starting speed is stable and widely compatible.
POWER SUPPLY		**Supernova 850W G2 80 Plus Gold** EVGA **£112** A reliable, quiet, gold-rated EVGA power supply, modular, with enough juice to sustain two overclocked graphics cards and a CPU.
SSD		**850 EVO 500GB** Samsung **£133** The 850 EVO is so good, there's not much need to step up to the more expensive 850 Pro for a gaming rig. Just get a bigger drive.
CASE		**Noctis 450** NZXT **£110** Thanks to its innovative interior layout and daring design, this case is a pleasure to work in and a beauty to behold.
DISPLAY		**Predator XB270HUbprz 144Hz G-Sync** Acer **£600** Simply the best: a 27" 1440p 144Hz IPS display, with Nvidia's variable refresh tech.
KEYBOARD		**Ducky One** Ducky **£100** An elegant set of keys from mechanical keyboard fan favourite Ducky. Renowned for their impeccable feel and build quality.
MOUSE		**Deathadder 2013** Razer **£59** Even if you've got money to burn, the Deathadder really is the best mouse you can buy right now.
HEADSET		**H Wireless** SteelSeries **£249** Our favourite wireless gaming headset, with great sound quality and a convenient battery swapping system for long gaming sessions.
JOYSTICK		**Dualshock 4** Sony **£38** For the high-end rig, we recommend the PS4 controller as well – £38 is about as much as you need to spend.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



Come on, ocean. I will fight you.

"Michael has no business in Poseidon's domain"

GTAV's ocean drowns me in dread

GTAV captures the ocean's otherworldly awfulness like no other game. It is a disorienting hall of mirrors, but one in which you can swim through the mirrors endlessly and in all directions until pressure crushes your body like a ketchup sandwich filled with crisps. The sea is like space with the added threat of monsters that will eat you, poison you, and wilfully confuse you by pretending to be rocks. That's why I respect swimmers more than astronauts.

I'm about to embark on the ultimate dive. I shall see great schools of flamboyant fish, high-five dolphins, and witness the majesty of humpback whales before bravely trying to stab one. As homebody Michael pours into an unflattering wetsuit and snorkels out from his submarine dock, the vibrant coral reef falls away until there's nothing but cold empty blue. Listening through headphones gives me the sensation my face is submerged in a fishbowl, the sounds of forceful breathing and that muffled flubflubflub triggering claustrophobia as bubbling oxygen pockets escape my mask. I'm trapped. What if I sneeze? What if I have an itch? What if I get bored? Man, the surface is all the way up there.

BEN GRIFFIN



THIS MONTH
Almost encountered what might have been a shark.

ALSO PLAYED
Fallout 4

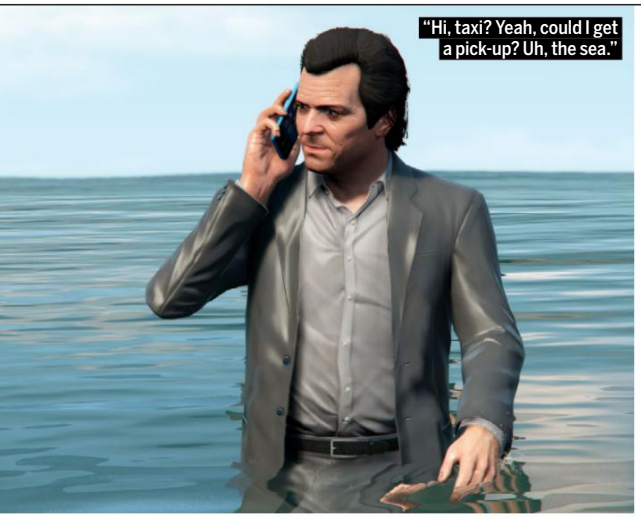
FOR REAL

I know Los Santos' Pacific is realistic because I went snorkelling in real life last year for 30 seconds. I took one look at the infinite void under my flapping feet then returned to the boat spitting briny seawater and reevaluating my place in the universe (I was actually in Madeira). Like me, Michael has no business in Poseidon's domain. Who really knows what's down here? There could be a portal to another universe. There could be a big squid. My mind starts to play tricks. I picture a great white barnacle-covered tentacle uncurling from the depths and pulling me downward past an array of increasingly ugly fish.

In reality I'd already be back on the boat, but this isn't reality – just a hideously accurate crack at one that might as well be. So I push on. That's how I swim, by pushing the water away



ANNOYINGLY HUMBLED IN THE AWE-INSPIRING PRESENCE OF NATURE, I PADDLE BACK TO SHORE


"Hi, taxi? Yeah, could I get a pick-up? Uh, the sea."

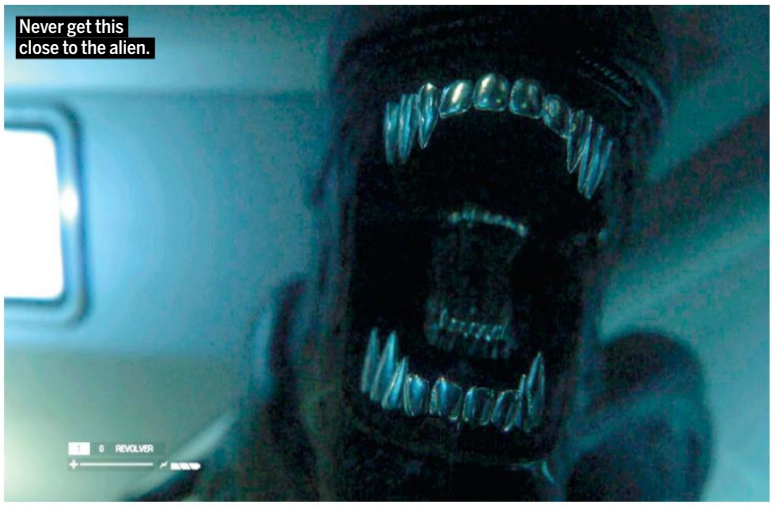


A heroic act of defiance.

like I'm disgusted by its very presence, because I am. Everything out here sucks. Whales are clumsy. Dolphins are annoying. Turtles are alright, a bit slow maybe. Not that I've seen one. That is until a vague grey shape suddenly forms up ahead and my mind plays that scene in Jaws of Richard Dreyfuss in the shark cage wiping his goggles before confirming, yes, he is utterly screwed. This is scarier than any gang war.

I look down to check there are no sharks below me, then left and right to check for sharks to my flanks, then up, then down again. Swimming in the sea is like crossing a road that extends into every conceivable angle and all the cars have teeth: the second you've checked one angle for danger you have to check another. "Left is clear, right is clear, but what about left agai-AAARRGH!" is how I imagine my imminent death will sound.

I practice a few painfully slow underwater jabs with brass knuckles, but what works on tramps in underpasses when no one's watching probably won't work on predators that have evolved over millennia for the sole purpose of killing me personally so, fed up of cloying paranoia and annoyingly humbled in the awe-inspiring presence of nature, I paddle back to shore and take a taxi to my big mansion so I can drink wine and watch TV. Thanks but no thanks, ocean. ■


Never get this close to the alien.

"I hear screaming, thrashing, and snarling"

Loving the alien in ALIEN: ISOLATION

ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Grew strangely attached to a ruthless killing machine.

ALSO PLAYED
Fallout 4

I'm crouching in a dark corner, watching a group of survivors. They've got guns, and they'll open fire if they see me emerge from the shadows. I don't blame them – a deadly creature is prowling the station. But I need to get past them, and I won't survive a straight firefight. So I decide to do something terrible. I craft a noisemaker and toss it in their direction. They panic and dash towards the electronic shrieking, guns primed. Then I hear a noisy thud from above in the vents. A black, curled shape drips from a hole in the ceiling. The alien is here.

NOISY SAVIOUR

I can't see what's happening – the noisemaker bounced around a corner when I threw it so the survivors are now out of view – but I can hear the sound of screaming, thrashing, snarling, and the wet splash of blood. I can't help but wince. The alien is ripping the survivors to shreds. Suddenly, there's silence. Then I hear the loud stomp of the beast's footsteps as it hunts for another victim. But there are none, and it slinks back through a vent cover. Silence. Well, that's certainly solved my problem.

I use this method many more times before the end. Whenever I see a group of gun-toting survivors, out come the noisemakers. Is it morally reprehensible? Maybe, but I'd feel a lot worse if the people I'm sending the alien to eviscerate weren't looting and shooting people. It's an interesting relationship: the alien is both my relentless hunter and my saviour. I even start to feel attached to it when it clears a path for me. I love you, you big terrifying bastard.

This kind of systemic design is one of the many reasons I count *Alien: Isolation* as one of my favourite games of all time. While there aren't as many things to play with as in games such as *Deus Ex* or *BioShock*, I like the way it trades complexity for an elegant, streamlined set of rules, enemy behaviours, and gadgets. This means whether you're up against humans, Working Joes, or the alien, there are multiple fun, interesting ways to distract, exploit, or disable them. Unfortunately, many of the Isolation team have drifted away to other studios or projects, so we may never see another game like *Alien: Isolation* again. ■


Another poor victim.



This is the most exciting-looking way to have no fun.



Oh yay, I'm so fulfilled.



It'll take about ten minutes to land after this.

"Every juggling prick thinks they're the life of the bloody party"

Getting all ten minutes of fun out of ROCKET LEAGUE's new Mutators

There are 10,000 people in *Rocket League*'s new Mutators matchmaking bracket tonight. In there, you get a random selection of 'fun' variations on traditional *Rocket League* – think hockey pucks, or lowered gravity, or a larger ball with different physics. How amusing! Imagine all of the fun times I can have!

Honestly, I was quite excited going into a match with these on, but after two brief games with the time warp modifier – which slows down the game whenever someone's about to take a shot, but actually just feels like the game is simulating lag – I wasn't impressed. I then tried out a game with a bigger ball and anti-gravity on. Oh cool! It's a skill-based game that now requires... less skill. Rad!

It's emblematic of my relationship with *Rocket League* as a whole, which has been complicated since launch. I know that the Mutators are a very generous freebie and that you can just completely ignore them and have *Rocket League* as it always is, but for some reason I have emotionally heightened responses to anything relating to this game. Something free and potentially cool comes along and I'm all like, 'NAH MATE.' What a dick. Still, the Mutators suggest that Psynoix can't improve upon pure *Rocket League*, particularly with novelty extras that make you thankful when the match is finally over. In anti-gravity it's particularly irritating because you have to wait for the ball to hit the floor before the match times out – and, of course, every juggling prick thinks they're the life of the bloody party and the game carries on forever.

That aside, my dynamic with *Rocket League* is as temperamental as ever. I've deleted it off my hard-drive at least three times in four weeks, and I'd been languishing in the middle of Bronze III in 2v2 ranked because I've had such poor fortune with talentless teammates (that's right, it's nothing to do with me, I'm brilliant). Ever since the rankings were reset I've been booted down to Bronze II as well, provoking a feeling not dissimilar to being put in the bottom group of PE.

SAMUEL ROBERTS



THIS MONTH
Wormed his way up and down Bronze III with other has-beens.

ALSO PLAYED
Silent Hill 2, Overwatch

SOMETHING FREE AND POTENTIALLY COOL COMES ALONG AND I'M ALL LIKE, 'NAH MATE.' WHAT A DICK

LESS TOXIC

There are reasons to be cheerful about *Rocket League*, however. Anecdotally I'd say that the game's playerbase seems a lot less toxic than it did a month or so ago. Cynically I want to attribute that change to games such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Call of Duty* coming out on PlayStation 4 and therefore distracting the attention of a certain type of teenager, but it could just be good luck. Whatever the cause, I've had nothing but positive experiences lately – a lot of 'ggs' at the end of the matches, and many polite apologies when people punt the ball into their own net in ranked, during which I remain silent in team chat while grabbing a pair of drying pants off my radiator in real life and pelting them across the room.

Plus, you can now stick a PC Gamer flag on your car, which is nice, though we are in there with Neogaf and Reddit, so we're not that special. See? I couldn't even have a healthy attitude about free stuff involving us, which should pander to my stupid ego. Screw this game. I love it. ■

"I get pleasant conversation and accidental efficiency"

Unintentional achievement in 80 DAYS

I've heard some amazing anecdotes from *80 Days* players. Stories of mystery, adventure, and quiet, sad failure. Looking over the achievement list, it's clear that a lot can happen on Fogg and Passepartout's trip. It sounds rather exciting: a wager, a time limit, and guaranteed hijinks. I travel a lot, but the most eventful journey I've ever taken was in an unairconditioned train that stunk oppressively of human excrement. I'm in the mood for something more romantic.

Instead I get mild adventure, pleasant conversation and accidental efficiency. We depart from London, and I quickly establish Passepartout as Fogg's unflappable valet. I will be calm and dependable; a man of the world, intrigued at the march of progress. Each time we arrive at a city, I plan out the route ahead – sometimes negotiating an earlier departure, other times exploring in search of faster or more direct routes.

Before long it's day 19 and we're in Istanbul. Some canny trading means we've got £11,000 in the bank. In all, it's been pretty uneventful. There was an incident with some pirates, but they were actually pretty chill. Most games reward efficiency, but I think here it's to my detriment. Taking a train to Iran, I catch a passenger using suction cups to scale the length of the train's exterior. That seems mysterious, but, before anything comes of it, we're in Tehran. I talk to some blacksmiths instead. They seem nice.

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Failed to find a meaningful adventure.

ALSO PLAYED
Fallout 4

SPLASHING THE CASH

Herat, Quetta and Lahore fly by. It's day 28, and we're in Dehli. I find a retired airship pilot rumoured to have the fastest ship in the world. I goad her into proving her claim by taking us to Hong Kong. She challenges me to produce £10,000. What the hell, it's time for some adventure. The pilot hates the English, and has called her ship the Death of the Empire. The whole journey passes without incident. We've been travelling for just over 30 days, and we're already in China. Why am I so good at this?

HE DRUGS ME WITH OPIATES IN A PLOT TO LOOSEN MY TONGUE AND I END UP WANDERING THE STREETS

Finally, in Hong Kong, some intrigue. An undercover detective claims Fogg is wanted for stealing £50,000. He drugs me with opiates in a plot to loosen my tongue and I end up wandering the streets looking for my master. I hear a rumour that someone English-looking boarded an airship for Yokohama. I follow. I'm penniless, so I join the circus in the hope of earning some cash. There, in the crowd at my first performance, I spot Fogg.

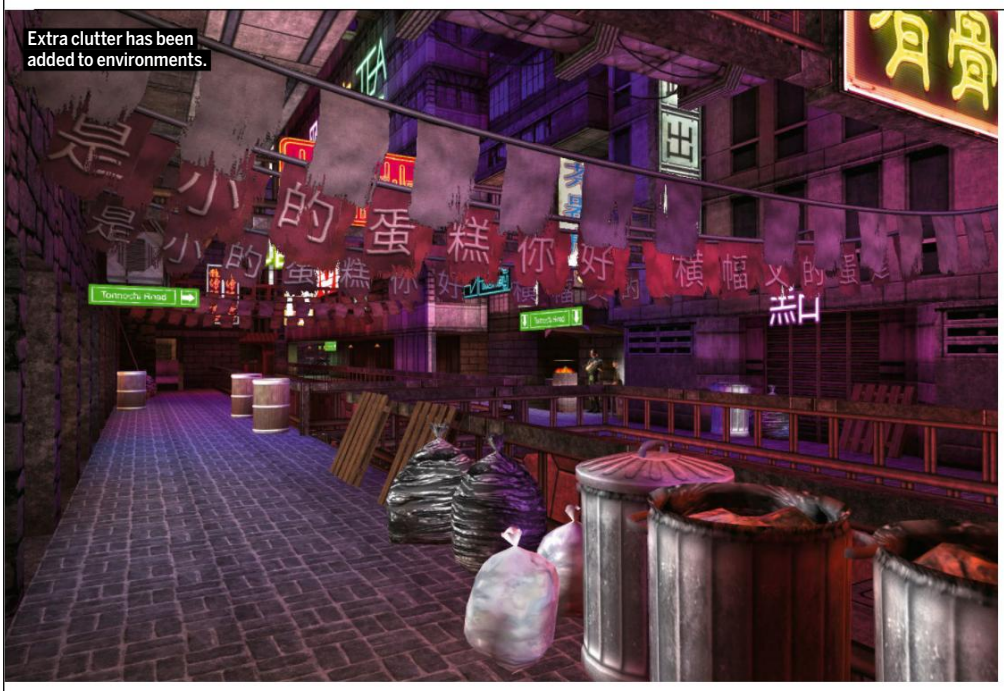
It feels like I'm collecting the first half of every story – pirates, train-scaling thieves, unscrupulous detectives all feel like plot threads I've misplaced before the payoff. I'm becoming increasingly reckless in the pursuit of drama. In Washington, I charter a flight to Ponta Delgada. As it leaves, I'm given an option: bribe the navigator to take us to London instead. It's a gamble, given the airship's fuel load. I take it happily. We crash outside of the UK. Hours later, a rescue ship picks us up and takes us the remaining distance. 67 days and only one life-threatening disaster. I'm a bit disappointed. Next time, I decide, I'll get Fogg killed. That'll be interesting. ■







FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB by Tom Sykes









1 DEUS EX: REVISION

MOD Time to revise for your *Deus Ex* ams

D*eus Ex* was hardly a looker in 2000, but it's been brought bang up to date with *Revision*, a mod that's not afraid to mess with the DNA of a classic. It mixes things up from the start, not only by sprucing up the lighting and textures, but by repositioning enemies, making night more night-like, and adding more areas to each map.

It's not the mod to play when you want to relive your *Deus Ex* memories in a higher resolution and with some quality of life tweaks, then, but a quick Google search will find you one of those. Instead, *Revision* changes just enough to make this feel like an unfamiliar game, to throw off your instincts and make you fully engage with each environment anew.

It's mostly added detail – extra clutter and foliage to supplement the atmosphere – but several locations have been enlarged quite considerably, in particular the now-enormous Hell's Kitchen. *Revision*'s divisive new soundtrack can thankfully be swapped out for the catchy original, while the *New Vision* and *Shifter* mods have been integrated too.

Given how reverent many mod creators understandably are towards the classics, it's exciting to see Caustic muck about with the fundamentals, transforming Kitchen's boxy collection of side streets into an entire cross-section of cyber-New York. The intricate level design has taken a severe hit in the process, but it's still marvellous to be able to explore more of *Deus Ex*'s world.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/DeusExRevision

2 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS TWEAKS

MODS Some small, fun add-ons to install

It's easy to forget about *New Vegas*, now that *Fallout 4* is here, but great mods continue to be released all the time. These aren't huge expansions that overhaul Obsidian's RPG, but they're fun little things that will let your personalise, extend, and increase the bucket count in your game.



PAINT YOUR WEAPON

Create powerful unique weapons, then slather paint all over them at a workbench. It was hard to feel attached to guns in the base game, so this is a great idea.

www.bit.ly/NewVegasMods1



BUCKET COMPANION

Cass, Rex and Lily Bowen did pretty well as your trusty companions, but who could resist replacing them with a floating bucket? Buckets can wield weapons and will obey basic orders.

www.bit.ly/NewVegasMods2



BOUNTIES III

Exhausted the people hunts included in the first two *Bounties* mods? Here, have some more. This latest is the hardest, and introduces a new area: the chilly Deep Creek Mountains.

www.bit.ly/NewVegasMods3

3 THE INCREDIBLE HULK

MOD We actually quite like you when you're angry

The *Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* was released a decade ago, and while we've had plenty of super-powered sandbox games since then, few have come close to that game's sense of silly destructive fun. The *Just Cause* games might be the closest, but even they fail in one key area: they don't star The Incredible Hulk. *GTAV*'s *Hulk* mod rectifies that failing in Rockstar's game, giving you control over the enormous brute and letting you loose on the streets of LA.

You don't need cars to get around here, because you can leap tall buildings with a single hulking bound. You can also tumble pedestrians out of your way like bowling pins, pick up cars and lampposts and fling them at all and sundry, and execute a ground-pound move that would make Mario green with envy. Since release, the mod has given the Hulk a worthy opponent to fight, in the form of his long-time adversary Abomination.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/GTAHulk


The Hulk goes on a good old-fashioned rampage.

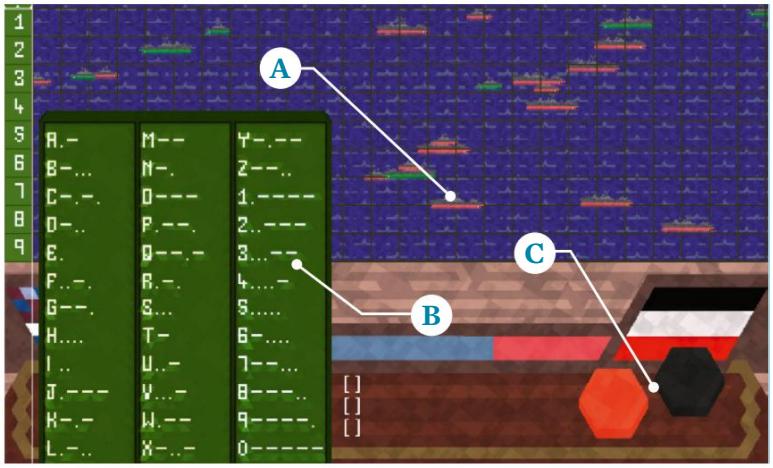
4 MORSE

WEBGAME The Morse the merrier in this novel freebie

Nothing to do with a certain Oxford-based detective, *Morse* is instead a game about relaying important messages via code. Specifically, you're transmitting coordinates during WWI, giving your troops the location of enemy soldiers, boats and planes. Once you've pinpointed their position – or pinpointed where they're *going to be* in a few seconds' time – you have to input that location with a cursor key by tapping, holding, and releasing it at the exact right moments to form actual letters from the Morse alphabet.

You have to watch over the land, sea and air simultaneously, something that soon becomes easier said than done.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/MorseGame



A SHIP-SHAPE These green ships are the enemy's, and need to be destroyed to let your troops advance across the board.

B SLUGGISH MORSE As the game advances, and the board expands, input both X and Y coordinates to target enemy troops.

C CODE READY You only play using two buttons. One inputs the code, while the other transmits it when you're ready.



5 HOMESICKENED

FREEWARE Home is where the heart is... buried

There's something pretty magical about ancient first-person games, made before id invented moving really fast, and before Barry Mouselook revolutionised the genre too. Early first-person titles feel hugely weird to control these days, and *Homesickened*'s sluggish movement captures that alien sensation wonderfully. The unsettling controls mingle with a town rendered in garish pixel art, and the end result is something that not only looks authentically old – it feels it too. *Homesickened*'s dreamlike village is one of the creepiest since Yume Nikki, home to a handful of weirdos speaking cryptically about your past.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Homesickened

6 BACK TO THE FUTURE: HILL VALLEY

MOD Go back to Back to the Future

This BTTF mod for *GTA: Vice City* has been in development for over seven years now, so the chances of it ever seeing version 1.0 are slim. Still, we can jump in at every update and muck around in Hill Valley anew – the best parts of BTTF having already been included in this lovely download. It's all about the DeLorean, which is in here as a vehicle you can drive and fly around in, at least until it runs out of fuel and you have to gather up nearby litter to get more juice. You can even travel through time to a similar-looking Hill Valley, by flipping the time circuits and taking the machine up to 88mph.

It's a scrappy mod, but an absurdly ambitious one with it, and I'll take that over a safe, sure graphical pack or an extra chunk of land any day. This latest version of *Hill Valley* adds the train from Back to the Future III, letting you chug through time in the souped-up locomotive Doc Brown appeared in at the end of the trilogy. The mod's creators plan to recreate every visited time period, adding a bit of meaning to your jaunty leaps through history.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/GTAHillValley


I'll push anyone who doesn't think Back to the Future III is good into manure.



7 READ ONLY MEMORIES

DEMO A trip down memory lane

MidBoss' game recalls Hideo Kojima's influential *Snatcher*, meaning it's a first-person point-and-click featuring AI, robots, and controversial body augments, with a trans-humanism theme running through it like a stick of rock. (Yeah, it's kinda reminiscent of *Deus Ex* as well.) *Read Only Memories* manages to carve its own identity, however. It's a progressive, thoughtfully written story set in Neo-San Francisco, (isn't it about time we actually put the word 'Neo' in front London or Tokyo?) You play as a struggling journalist, recruited by a robot to find its missing creator.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/ReadOnlyMemories



Is Alive is tough, so you may be described as 'Is Dead' before long.

8 DIABLO 2: IS ALIVE

MOD Craft, quest and take on rock-hard super-bosses

Diablo 3 disappointed a lot of people, even after its many revisions, but this giant mod handily reminds us that its predecessor is still breathing. The oddly named *Is Alive* adds a ton to the action RPG, including a crafting system, additional quests and powerful super-bosses. If you'd rather fussily micromanage your own items than get a qualified merchant to do that for you, you can now mash stuff together with the new crafting components found throughout the world, dropped by enemies, or given as a reward for completing quests. New items include the shiny gemswords, giving you something meaningful to do with that overflowing gem bag.

Crafting ties into the new enemies and bosses as well, who have a chance of dropping rare components after you've done them in. Although difficult, and quite poorly explained, *Is Alive* should offer a worthy challenge to *Diablo* pros.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Diablo2IsAlive



9 RESIDENT EVIL HD REMASTER

MODS Become the master of unlocking Capcom's game

While it doesn't have any official modding support, the community has been busy tearing *Resident Evil*'s hi-def remaster apart, before putting it back together in interesting ways.

Horrible oversights such as the lack of a playable Barry Burton (a *Resi* cult hero, best known for his moustache) have been duly corrected, while others have brought the game more in line with the 1996 original. There's a wealth of new character models available, including Leon and Claire from *Resi 2*, Juliet Starling from *Lollipop Chainsaw* and, er, *Halo*'s hardy Master Chief. He hardly strikes me as someone who would be afraid of a few piffling zombies.

I've selected my favourite mods in the box opposite, but the most audacious of all is probably the *Deadly Silence* mod (*www.bit.ly/RemasterDS*), which replaces the detailed character models of Capcom's remaster with the low poly cast of DS title – you've guessed it – *Deadly Silence*. Once you've gawked at that beauty, divert your eyes right and get a load of these.

THE THREE R'S
Remastering the *Resi* remaster



1 ORIGINAL VOICE ACTING
Remaster's new, non-rubbish voice acting is kind of missing the point, so this mod that adds them back in is well worth it. "You were almost a Jill sandwich," indeed.

www.bit.ly/RemasterMods1



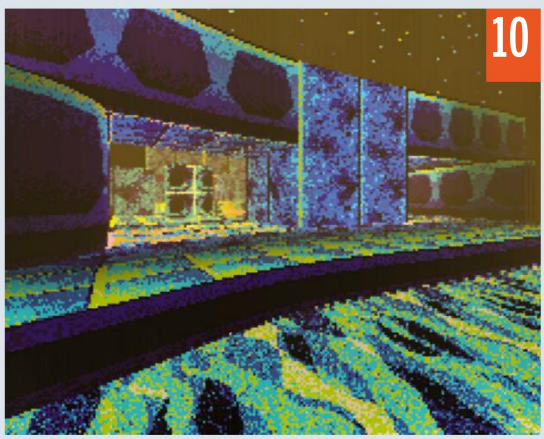
2 BARRY BURTON
Barry finally secured a starring role in *Resident Evil Revelations 2*, but I always wanted to play as the bearded wonder in the original. Now we can, Magnum and all.

www.bit.ly/RemasterMods2



3 FLUFFY MANAGER
The Fluffy Manager tool makes it easier to use mods with a variety of *Resi* games, but it also comes with tweaks, including door animation skips and optional invincibility.

www.bit.ly/RemasterMods3



10 KNOSSU

FREEWARE Non-Euclidean horror in a glitchy maze

You're tasked with exploring a glitchy labyrinth in Jonathan Whiting's excellent *Knossu*, a first-person puzzler that mixes horror with brain-melting geometry. There are two fascinating things going on here, and if you don't want them spoiled I suggest scrunching up your eyes.

The first thing is *Knossu*'s world makes no damned sense, containing one-sided door-portals that transport you to new locations, and endless looping hallways that require a bit of pattern-breaking to solve. However, the absolute best part is *Knossu*'s lurking horror: an invisible mass of static that eats away at the world as it hunts you, hurling you back to the hub room after noisily gobbling you up.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Knossu

WORLD OF TANKS

How has update 9.12 affected Wargaming's MMO shooter? By Mike Stubbs

World of Tanks has changed dramatically since its launch back in 2011. Rules have been messed with, core systems tweaked beyond recognition and a ton of new stuff added to make this one of the most content-rich free-to-play games out there. The latest big milestone is update 9.12, a sizeable patch that introduces a lot of new content while also incorporating a fair number of balance and performance tweaks.

The flagship addition of 9.12 is the Rampage game mode, which was originally introduced as a timed event in update 9.10. With patch 9.12 it's become a fully-fledged game mode and is here to stay for the foreseeable future, slightly tweaked from its debut. While some of the hardcore might say that it deviates too far from what made *World of Tanks* great, most seem to think that Rampage is not just a fun new mode but also a great way of bringing new players into the fold due to its more immediate style of play.

In the simplest sense, Rampage mode turns the typically slow *World of Tanks* into a fast-paced deathmatch, where killing as many enemies as quickly as possible and completing objectives is the way to win. Within Rampage mode there are two sub modes that feature very different rules, but both have the same pacing and aggression.

Steel Hunt mode exclusively features tier X tanks (which can be rented if you don't own one) and is a free-for-all deathmatch where kills score points. If, however, you chose to go in with a platoon (up to three players), it turns into a team-based game where you must capture or destroy other platoons' flags. Steel Hunt features infinite respawns, meaning you are never out of the action too long and that you will always see the end of the game, which is a complete change to the traditional random battles. This enables players to take more risks and it can quickly descend into chaos.

Domination is the other sub-mode of Rampage and is much more of an objective-based game. Teams of 10 or 15 vehicles between tiers 8 and 10 will fight it out to capture the opponent's flag and deliver it back to their own base, much like a traditional capture-the-flag-mode. Unlike Steel Hunt, respawns are limited to three, and each time you must use a different vehicle. The ever-changing tactics about when to use a certain vehicle result in an exciting extra layer to the carnage.

AIR SUPERIORITY

Another new aspect of Rampage mode is its artillery and air strikes. In both of the Rampage game modes players will be able to earn these combat reserves by scoring points and dealing damage. They can then be used to drop ordnance onto opponents to give a tactical advantage and hopefully secure a kill.

The final new additions for Rampage mode are the Berlin map that can be played in Domination and a set of 30 new missions. The map has a fictional layout based on the German capital, but many authentic landmarks from the city can be spotted while rolling around. The missions offer a variety of in-game challenges split evenly across the two Rampage modes. When all of them have been completed, the T-22 Medium tank will unlock.

Rampage mode is not the only major change in update 9.12. The most significant of the alterations is the new vehicle draw distance system. Prior to the update, vehicles that were in a 1,000 by 1,000 metre square would be drawn on the screen. Unfortunately the area being a square meant that players would be able to see vehicles further away if they looked diagonally rather than straight ahead, which clearly isn't very realistic. Now the draw distance area has been changed to a circular shape, meaning vehicles can be seen from the same distance at all viewing angles, which for high-skill players is a substantial and important overhaul.

As with any update, there have also been more than a few balance tweaks and new additions. The FV4202, a tier X British medium tank, has been removed temporarily and replaced with the Centurion Action X, while the tier VIII M4A1 Revalorisé has been added to the French catalogue. Over 25 tanks have received new HD visual models and a few have had their names changed. A large portion of the tanks have also received balance changes, the most notable being the changes to the Caernarvon UK and the Conqueror UK which now both feature the turret of the Centurion Action X.

PLAYERS WERE ABLE TO SEE VEHICLES FURTHER AWAY IF THEY LOOKED DIAGONALLY RATHER THAN STRAIGHT AHEAD

A few interface additions such as a new screen for selecting camouflage, inscriptions and emblems has been added along with the ability to invite people to join your clan straight from the post-battle screen. Rounding out the update is a small but important change to tournament play that will give players credits and XP for completing tournament matches just like random battles, meaning that playing in esports events will still allow you to progress in-game.

Update 9.12 isn't the biggest patch *World of Tanks* has ever received, but it is one of the more significant. While it doesn't transform things beyond recognition, it makes for a more well-rounded and accessible free-to-play shooter. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 2010	DEVELOPER Wargaming
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK www.worldoftanks.eu





Ghost tanks still haunt the French countryside.





After update 9.12, high-def visual models abound.





When tanks go sightseeing.



What a world of tanks really looks like.

UPDATE 9.12 IN NUMBERS

That's numbertank!



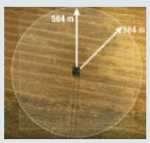
28

The number of tanks that received HD visual upgrades.



8-10

The tiers of tanks that can play in Rampage mode.



564

The radius of the new vision circle in metres.



30

The amount of personal missions you must complete to unlock the T-22.

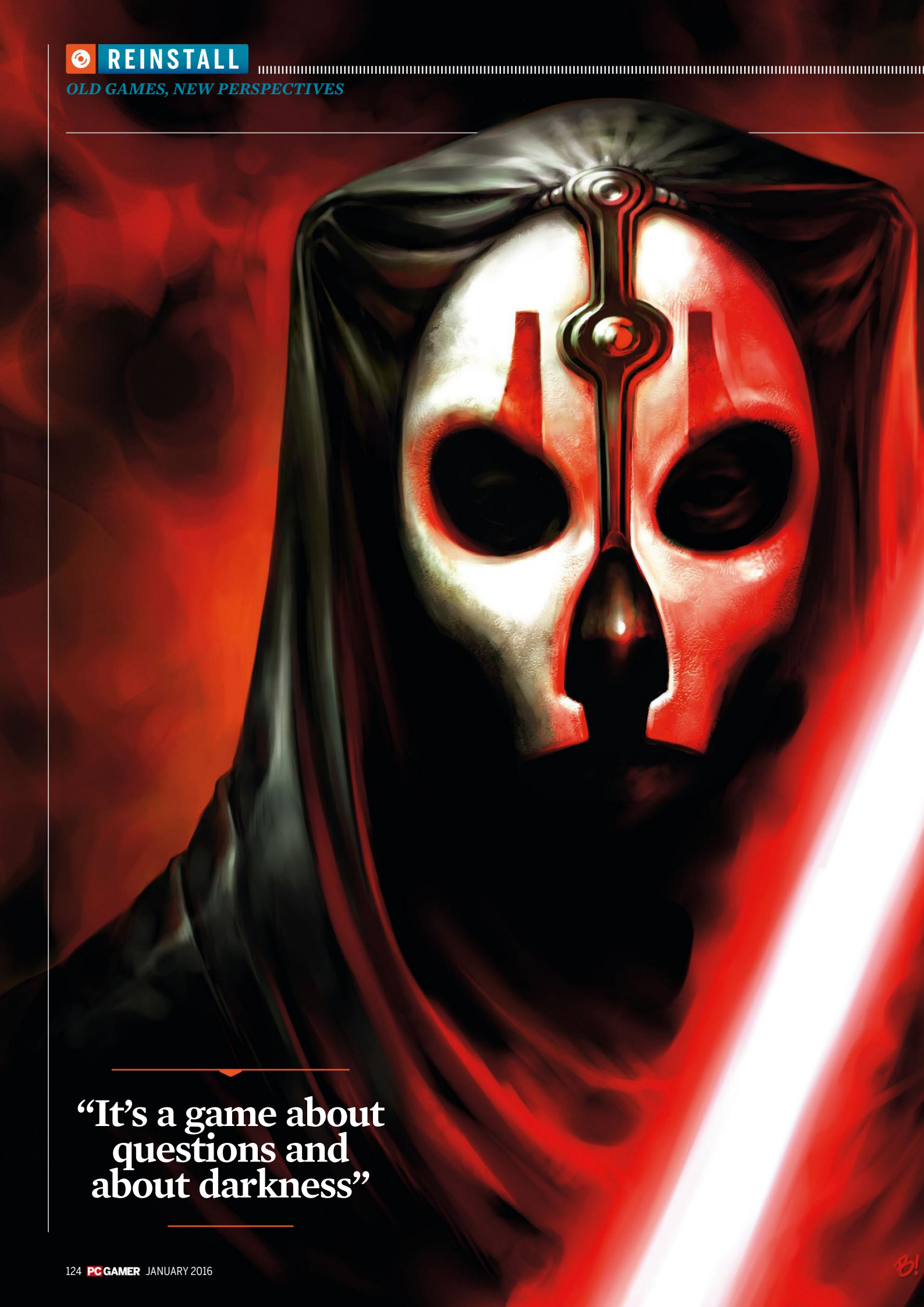


Sorry about that, Berlin.





Stealth tanks lie in wait.



"It's a game about questions and about darkness"


Darth Revan never had to put up with this shit, that's all I'm saying.

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

BROKEN ANGELS

With party members like these...



BAO-DUR
Engineer. Last seen feeling awful about building a planet destroying super-weapon. Don't call him jigsaw-face.



ATTON RAND
Pilot. Wise-ass. Oh, and secret former Jedi hunter and torturer. One of those whiney self-loather types.



KREIA
Formerly Darth Traya. She's been a Jedi, she's been a Sith, and now she's a bitter old lady. She's good at it.



HANDMAIDEN
Loyal servant of fallen Jedi Atris. Has a 'thing' for sparring in her underwear. Videogames.



MIRA
A bounty hunter. But a nice one. Doesn't kill you until she meets you. Or wear proper shirts.

The Light Side of the Force, now with the original fifty shades of grey. *By Richard Cobbett*

What stands out most about *Knights of the Old Republic II* is that it's less a sequel than a deconstruction. At times, an assassination. Most licensed games, at least those that don't just put familiar characters into a platform or kart racing game, are incredibly careful. They give us the accepted face of their licence, and maybe sprinkle on a few jokes and meta-references for the hardcore fans. They're respectful. They don't tread on any toes.

KotOR 2 goes for the throat. It's a game about questions and about darkness, and designer Chris Avellone is particularly keen to peel back the more uncomfortable niceties of its universe, such as the convenient split between 'good' and 'evil', and the damage that leads to those labels.

Much of it is designed to invert the original game, as *BioShock 2* did with its predecessor. *KotOR* was, by and large, set in the light side of the universe: a heroic quest, noble warriors fighting evil from a position of moral authority and righteousness. There was a Dark Side path and moral choices, but it was clear what you were 'supposed' to do. Rise up. Become a Jedi Knight. Beat up the guy in black armour who wants to conquer the galaxy. It was the right story at the right time, the Star Wars experience everyone wanted.

KotOR 2 uses the same engine and style for entirely different purposes.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2004

DEVELOPER
Obsidian

PUBLISHER
LucasArts

LINK
www.bit.ly/19jhmji

For starters, it takes place primarily in the dark – among the poor and criminal-controlled corners of a galaxy still scarred and bleeding from both the Mandalorian Wars and a brutal Sith assault that has largely wiped out the Jedi Order. The player character is no hero, but an outcast, the Exile, banished for making a difficult decision at the right time, who draws allies not by need or force of charisma but a subconscious Force Bond that binds them (much as the Mark of Torment drew suffering souls to The Nameless One in *Planescape: Torment*). Fallen knights. Assassins. Gangsters. Bounty hunters. All of them primarily defined not by their potential, but by their pain.

In *KotOR* we met spunky young Twi'lek Mission Vao and her bodyguard Zaalbar – a Wookiee who owes her a life-debt. *KotOR 2* brings us a similar case with bounty hunter


The game starts with you in trouble. And the ugliest underwear ever.


Oh God it's that bloody band, playing their one damn song.


Korriban was much more fun when you were an undercover Sith.

Mira and Hanhaar, the difference being that Hanhaar sees this, not unreasonably, as slavery. He's also a sociopath, restrained only by that one scrap of culture. Far from a cuddly teddy-bear looking to protect his human, he longs to free himself by killing her, ideally horribly, on the grounds that her death will free him. Yet at the same time, he's too caught up in the concept to listen when she tries to tell him that he doesn't owe her a damn thing and can just leave.

Easily the most successful of the team is the Exile's mentor, Kreia, whose presence can best be described as like going on an adventure with your mother-in-law. Kreia can be mistaken for an assault on Star Wars' simplistic morality, there for parables such as helping a beggar and then seeing him beaten up as a demonstration that even good acts can have deadly consequences. That's overly reductive. Firstly, her belief system is every bit as dogmatic as the Jedi/Sith code, only revolving around balance and self-reliance. Second... spoiler alert... she's the villain. Like everyone else, her philosophy ultimately comes from pain – betrayal, exile. She's not a character you're necessarily meant to agree with, just one there to make you think.

For the most part, doing good deeds in *KotOR 2* does result in good things happening. It's just that the game also wants to explore how the road to Hell can be paved with good intentions, and how good people can fall without realising it. Jedi historian Atris, for instance, is too busy seeing the Dark Side in you to notice how quickly she herself fell.

By this point, you've probably noticed something – a lot of talk about story, not a whole lot about the game. Unfortunately, there's a reason for that. *KotOR 2* suffered from one of the most premature launches of the last decade. Not only did it have just a 14-16 month development cycle, but LucasArts ended up dragging it back from 2005 to 2004. It showed. Great chunks of the game were pulled, much of what was left was rough as old boots made of sandpaper, and the final chapters were embarrassingly incomplete. Some levels were little more than linear corridors containing the same

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

KotOR characters live on in *The Old Republic*

Both *KotOR* games live on into BioWare's MMO. Darth Revan now has his own cult, and the Exile, now named Meetra Surik, is also around. If you haven't played *TOR*, it's worth a look. Free-players can access most of the game, including all the class stories, which touch on the *KotOR* characters and their offspring. Paying unlocks later-game content including a Shadow of Revan campaign, and singleplayer *Knights of the Fallen Empire*.

The planned *KotOR 3* would likely have seen either the Exile or a new protagonist chasing Revan to the heart of a True Sith empire at the height of its power. Other planned elements included assassin droid HK-47's ultimate humiliation, being reduced to a sarcastic backpack after losing its legs, and enemies powerful enough to shape whole galaxies. A genuine loss.





The combat and interface are so fiddly by modern standards.

THE RUSH TO GET THE GAME OUT IN A YEAR DIDN'T LEAVE MUCH TIME FOR NICETIES

handful of enemies to fight. The already spartan design became downright minimalistic.

Most awkwardly of all, most of the Companion plots were simply unfinished. There'd be a scene on the last world where, for instance, two of the droids on the ship were having a showdown, and then... nothing. We never went back to finish that, the Exile instead having an atrocious final boss fight while being chased by flying lightsabers, in a scene that begged for the Benny Hill music, and then the whole planet exploding with an almost apologetic shrug.

A NEW HOPE

Over the next few years, fans created the *Sith Lords Restored Content* mod – installed by default on the Steam version. Much of the missing content, including voice files, turned out to be there all the time, just disabled. This mod switches it back on.



As a result, the *KotOR 2* we have now is a far superior game to the one that came out in 2004. The catch is that even at the time it was a clumsy RPG. That's partly due to the graphics and controls, not helped by *KotOR* having been primarily designed for the Xbox (which, as we all remember, had a potato instead of a graphics card). It's partly because of the combat, which was still rooted in the D&D style of BioWare's past games: a massive clash between cinematic action, constant pausing and barely concealed dice-rolling.

Also, the rush to get the game out in a year didn't leave much time for niceties. So much of the game feels like it's taking place in a shoebox, albeit one found a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

It doesn't help that by far the worst part comes at the start. The Exile wakes up on the abandoned Peragus station, which desperately wants to be a *System Shock* experience full of looming electronic horror, but is actually the dullest couple of hours this side of *Myst*. Thankfully there's a mod to skip it on subsequent playthroughs, but too much story is drip-fed here to do that the first time around. Later worlds improve on this, highlights including a two-part civil war on Onderon and a battle between rival bounty hunters on Nar Shaddaa. Still, few scenes have the raw zip of infiltrating Korriban's Sith Academy back in the first game. You may return to the planet in this one, but like much of the galaxy, it's in a bad state.

In short, as a raw game, *KotOR 2* doesn't hold up that well. It's not awful, it sometimes shines, but even post-fixes, it wears both its era and its tortured development on its sleeve. If you're going to try it now, especially for the first time, it really does have to be for two things: the writing and the characters. Kreia especially is one of the best game characters ever written, never mind in the Star Wars universe, and while the issues that Chris Avellone raises may have been covered in the Expanded Universe, they're a breath of fresh air in a mainstream game. Even if it's not quite an RPG classic, it's very much a game to respect – and a great example of how flipping the perspective on a licence can be endlessly more interesting than playing things straight. ■

SAMUEL ROBERTS



I play random nonsense in my Steam library rather than getting anywhere near the end of the games everyone else is talking about.



ROCKET LEAGUE

www.rocketleague.psyonix.com

Stupid *Rocket League* with its stupid DeLorean. Now that all the idiots have cleared out following Back To The Future Day, however, it's a bit less annoying playing comedy car football, and the free extras really do keep coming. I've found the community less toxic of late, too, but I'm still pretty bad at it.



D4: DARK DREAMS DON'T DIE

www.d4-game.com/pc

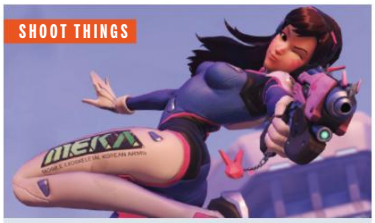
My personal pick of 2015, as you probably read earlier in this issue, is an episodic mystery story sadly cut short before its resolution. It follows a former detective as he tries to solve his partner's murder by travelling back in time on a crashed aircraft. Fascinating work from the talented creators of *Deadly Premonition*.



COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT

www.commandandconquer.com

Why the hell am I still playing this ancient strategy game? Well, I bought that *C&C* complete collection set after a few pints and I'm having a few more spins on skirmish mode. Those poor Allies. Chronotanks are total piss next to mammoth tanks and nuclear subs.



OVERWATCH

www.overwatch.com

There's definitely some class balancing to be worked out based on this closed beta, but I'm absolutely loving teleporting behind the battle lines as Reaper and taking enemies out from behind. Not totally sold on the random spread of character designs yet (sorry!), but this is a damned fun multiplayer FPS.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Samuel Roberts



DUNGEON OF THE ENDLESS

www.bit.ly/1lijYF8

I played this odd spin-off of Amplitude's *Endless* series with PCG US's Wes Fenlon recently. It's a brilliant co-op roguelike that lets you find, recruit and control more characters as you go. It adopts an entirely different-but-gorgeous visual style to the other *Endless* games. Also features *TF2* characters.



SILENT HILL 2

www.bit.ly/10CoTdU

I was too scared to play all the way through this at release, but after seeing Akira Yamaoka perform the soundtrack live in Bristol, I've gone back. It was remarkably ahead of its time in presentation of setting: the first 30 minutes is just you groping through the town in the fog, setting the scene. Truly brilliant.



CHILD OF LIGHT

www.bit.ly/1RKW9jN

I've just started this JRPG-infused sidescroller, which has turn-based combat with a few decent real-time tweaks. The rhymey dialogue might get on your tits a bit, but the art direction and music are lovely. This is a big publisher trying to cultivate an 'indie' style – but I don't mind when the games are this good.



WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

www.wolfenstein.com

My favourite singleplayer shooter in years. I wish *Call Of Duty* would take a few cues from how *The New Order* does level design, gun feel and the ability to kill enemies on the Moon. *Wolfenstein* made me realise that the notion of an exciting shooter campaign isn't dead, it's just been neglected by other developers.

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IT'S ALL OVER...

Episodes IV-VI

THE UNFATHOMABLE BATTLEFRONT

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The evil Galactic Empire inexplicably sends its leader, the Emperor, into frontline combat on Endor with the Rebels and their leader, Leia Organa.

Luke Skywalker fights in the Battle of Hoth, wearing clothes and wielding a lightsaber he won't obtain until an entire film later. He is stomped to death by an AT-AT.

Meanwhile, the evil lord Darth Vader takes time out of his busy schedule to hunt the smuggler Han Solo on some volcanic planet no one's ever heard of...

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